

A movie poster for 'The Janitor' featuring a shirtless man with a bloody and bruised face and body. He has a bandage wrapped around his right hand, which is also bloody. The background is a dark, textured red. The title 'THE JANITOR' is written in large, bold, yellow letters, and the name 'JAN IRVING' is at the top in white. The 'Loose Id' logo is at the bottom.

JAN IRVING

THE
JANITOR

Loose Id

THE JANITOR

Jan Irving

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The Janitor

Jan Irving

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Dedication

I wrote this for Kitty.

It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog.

– Mark Twain

Chapter One

Instant Coffee

"Hey, how ya' doin'?"

Noel shifted on his chair, giving the janitor—*What was his name? Dane. Yeah, Dane*—a glance under his lashes. He nodded, swallowing.

"What you readin' there? You read a lot, man. Like...like you read so much, your head probably is like this library, right? Just...boom! With all them books."

"Uh, just studying." He saw one thick calf sit on the chair next to him. Dane was smoking, and you weren't supposed to, but Noel had seen him disable the fire alarms in this part of the library on campus before he cleaned. No one was ever up here in this dusty part of the tower, so he could get away with it.

"Man, I sure need some of those books. You think maybe if I lay down, they could feed them into me, like on *Star Trek* or something? Some kind of insta-knowledge? Like instant coffee, you know?"

Now Noel felt Dane's eyes on him, waiting for a reaction. "I can make really good instant coffee, you know that?"

"No." Noel's eyes blinked, fawn-soft, behind his glasses. Dane was so...big. Dark, sleek, olive skin. And vibrant. He had a shiner over one eye. Noel looked away, embarrassed for him, though he wasn't sure why.

"Well, I do. You gotta come by my place some morning. I'll make you some. I got this microwave. It's larger than the ones they make now. Found it on the street, can you believe that? Someone just...threw it out! But I picked it up, carried it seven blocks to my place, and it works. It might mean, you know, I get radioactive or something, since I heard that they can make you sterile, but I'm totally not worried about that. And now I heat the milk, see, in a little jug, and then I pour it over the instant coffee and add lots of sugar...sometimes some nutmeg, 'cause it seems all right—not sure what you use

nutmeg for, actually, but hey, it ain't steak spice, right? So I figure it's okay. So yeah, I just add that, or cinnamon, and I got excellent coffee. Just like the Italian, right?"

Noel watched Dane's lips moving, the way his hand waved in the air, the way his dark eyes were focused on Noel.

"You don't mind me talkin' to you, I hope? I mean...I know I talk a lot. But I like people. I like you."

"Uh, thanks. No, I don't mind."

"Aw, see you're nice. I like nice people. Sometimes people who read a lot, and you know, have money and stuff, don't think too much of me. Just the muscle. Just...dumb. But I actually have a lot of thoughts sometimes. Sometimes I do, you'd be surprised."

Noel found himself nodding, engaged despite himself. It was always like this with the janitor. He'd come in and start talking, and Noel couldn't look at anything else. It was like Dane was a performer and he held the stage.

He saw the white bandages wrapped around Dane's hand, and his lips pursed.

"Oh, yeah. Still a little bloody, right? From my last fight."

"You...fight?"

"Oh, yeah! I'm a very serious fighter. Yeah. I fight all the time. See this shiner? This shiner I got when I lost my last fight, but you shoulda seen me. I was great, you know what I'm sayin'? I was sensational. Only, the guy I fought, he was more." Dane laughed and rocked back and forth, and Noel found his lips quirking. "So you ever get hungry up here with all these books?"

"I...no."

"Oh, that's too bad, since, you know, I get very hungry around books. Yeah, I do. They make me want to go to Benny's and have a burger or somethin'. Maybe...you know, maybe you might like that?"

Noel shook his head. "No, I... No, please, I can't."

"Oh, okay. It's all right! Absolutely!" Dane's thick calf disappeared. He was wearing black jeans and a black wife beater with a blue shirt over it. His cigarette burned on the corner of his lip as he looked down at Noel. "I don't want to be a nuisance or nothin'. Can see you are a very serious man yourself."

"Too serious," Noel said, feeling bad. But he couldn't go anywhere with Dane. He had to study. His father checked his progress to make sure he kept to his assigned schedule every week. And what would he say to someone like Dane? Dane was...glamorous. He wasn't shy.

"Naw, I am a serious man about fightin', and you are serious about the books, right? Now I'll just do my mopping thing, and you can feel free to talk to me if you want. I'd like that. Maybe I'll even learn something!"

Dane picked up the mop and bucket, and Noel watched him. "I don't know..."

"What don't you know?"

"What to say." Noel ducked his head.

"Well, you could read to me, a little. You gotta nice voice. Real educated and stuff. I like to hear that."

Noel blushed. "You do?"

"Yeah. You know those poems you wrote weren't so bad. I was thinking about the one where you was alone on an island, and I guess that sort of was like you saying you felt alone, like you was the island. I thought about that one quite a lot. You know, since last week."

Noel's eyes widened. "I had no idea you'd like that one so much! You are correct: I was trying to use the island as a metaphor. I'm afraid it wasn't very original, though."

"Original? Oh, yeah, I'm sure it was very...uh, you know, special. Like...no one else ever had those kinds of thoughts before. Hell, I know I didn't, till you read it to me!"

"I'm happy you admired it."

"So you want to read me another?" Dark eyes looked up. Soft, hot; Noel the focus of their attention.

"I... uh."

"C'mon, sure you do. You got another island one? Or there was the other one about that statue of a man, you know? The one you said I looked like."

"The *David*! Yes. You have a beautiful form."

"Why, thank you. Can you show me a picture of this dude? You said you would, you know, if you had time and stuff."

Reaching for his cane, Noel got to his feet and timidly made his way over to the book stacks where the art books were kept. He felt self-conscious and awkward as he passed Dane, who was dancing on his heels, so vibrant and healthy. He put his cane down and struggled to lift the heavy book. Big hands with white wrappings and red stains and black hairs on the backs were suddenly there. He saw a mole by the corner of one of Dane's eyes, and his lashes swept up so that Noel could see his eyes, close up. Black. Devouring black. "Your eyes are almost as dark as your pupils. That's very singular."

"Yeah? You mean they're nice eyes, right? I mean, you wouldn't say nothin' if you didn't like 'em."

"I do. I like them very much." Noel cleared his throat. "The picture of *David* is in this book."

"Man, it's a heavy book! Uhhhh!" Dane made a show of carrying it to the table, and Noel knew it was for the sake of his pride. He didn't know how to feel about that. His stomach was all tight under the three sweaters and two T-shirts he was wearing to keep warm.

He shifted the pages, aware of warm breath behind him, the big body of Dane looming. It made him feel oddly delicate, which was something only this janitor made

him experience. "Here." He pointed to the statue of David. "He's in Firenze. I've been there. The marble is as smooth as skin to the touch."

"Yeah? That's me, right?" Dane looked. "Oh, I don't have curly hair."

"Well, no, his hair is more like my own, but his form..." Noel cleared his throat. "He has a very heroic form."

"Yeah? He was a hero too? That's cool!"

"Well, yes, David was a famous hero. He was an underdog, you see." Noel wasn't certain if he should continue. Would Dane find it condescending if he knew the story?

"Really? I like stories about losers who become heroes. My favorite. Sort of inspiration. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"You're not a loser, Dane."

"Thank you, and you are very sensational yourself. I like that."

Noel pushed back his tangled curls. "Like what?"

"You said my name. Like I'm a person. Like you see me."

Noel's eyes widened. "Of course I see you."

"That's totally great! Well, you want to tell me about David then? Though I gotta say, I'm packing more than that postage stamp he's wearing there. What's with that? He's not so heroic in the men's department." Dane laughed.

Noel coughed, caught between laughter and embarrassment. "He was carved that way to show he was better than his animal self. It was a salute to intellect."

"Oh... Well, looks like he'd have to do a lot of thinking, since he lacked the goods for much else, but it's nice he was a hero and stuff, anyway. Maybe makes up for it a little? I just wanted you to know that I wasn't lacking as such. At all," Dane finished proudly.

Noel swallowed. "Dane..."

"Sorry, I can see that my bathroom talk has embarrassed you. You're a very shy person, but I want you to know I don't think that makes you, you know, a bad person. Some very shy people go on to do some amazing stuff. Some are like, president, and everything."

Noel was at a loss for words. He bit his lip.

"So, you know, after the story, you want to maybe head down to the beach and look at the tide comin' in? I love doing that. Makes me feel all free, you know? Like I could go where I like if I wanted. We could do that. I was thinkin' it might be nice, and you could maybe think up some more poetry, and I'd buy you a hot dog. What do you say?"

"I..." Noel ducked his head.

"I guess I make you nervous. I don't mean nothin' by it, you know? I mean, I wouldn't hurt you, you bein' smaller than me. I'm a big guy, but I'm gentle. I'd...I'd be gentle with you."

Noel looked up, drowning in soft, wistful dark chocolate.

"I'm gay, just in case you didn't figure it. Yeah. I'm bein' straight with you about it, in case you missed I was hittin' on you. Some fellas, they like to, you know, ambush their dates. Play it like a buddy, but I don't go that way. I'm straight up. Well, not straight, but you know, I wouldn't lie to you none. I really, really think you're a sensational person, so I was thinking hot dogs."

"Hot dogs are oddly phallic. Except people eat them."

Dane blinked, licking his teeth. "Oh, like eating a hot dog makes you think of oral sex? So maybe you are gay, right? And maybe you just don't know it."

"I...I don't know."

"You don't trust me?"

"No, you seem very nice, but...I don't know if I'm... I never thought about it much."

"Yeah?" Dane laughed, picking up his mop. His eyes were down and his color high, and Noel wondered if this was hard for him too. He felt like he was peering at the other man over a high fence with which he had surrounded himself. It almost hurt his skin, being so close to Dane. As if his body woke up and became sensitized. "Man, I think about it all the time. All the time."

Noel ran a finger over his cane. "I can't walk on the sand. It's hard on my leg."

"Oh, right! Man, I wasn't thinkin'! Obviously you totally don't have to come. I mean, I don't want to make you uncomfortable or nothin'."

"You didn't," Noel lied. "Well, I should..."

"What about my story?" Dane asked wistfully. His full lip fell into a bit of a pout. Noel found himself wondering what it would feel like to kiss that pout. It was a singular thought. Perhaps it was Dane's earthiness.

"I will read it to you if you like."

"Hey, I like! I'm just glad you feel you can totally still read to me." Dane's broad back was to Noel, so all Noel could see was shaggy brown hair and the shirt falling off one shoulder to reveal the black wifebeater and looking oddly enticing, like Dane was a siren, and he was showing off his sex with that one bare shoulder...

Oh, dear, Noel scolded himself. He was having some odd thoughts!

"I would love to read to you. I've never gone to a beach before."

Mop in hand, Dane glanced back at him. "With anyone?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Noel cleared his throat. "I had a car accident when I was little. Spent most of my time in rehab learning how to walk. It's why I have a doctorate now. I read a lot, as you say."

"Oh. Well, I just want you to know, I get that you haven't been with anyone before...uh, I mean for a walk on the beach. And that's okay. That's totally fine. I meant what I said. I'm not a pushy guy. I can be... I'm not rough unless I'm fightin'."

Noel felt a hot wash of feeling splash through him. Every time Dane said he was gentle, he pictured those big hands touching his skin. He cleared his throat. "Well, I'll read to you now."

"And you'll be here next week, right? Or I could come back tomorrow, 'cept it's my day off and I like to sleep and do laundry. But I could anyway."

"Oh, you don't have to come here and clean on your day off."

"But maybe you could read to me. I'd really like to hear more of your poems. Maybe you could, like maybe one day, dedicate one to me. That would be excellent."

Chapter Two

Goldie

Dane sucked on some more ice chips as he rubbed his big calf. His body was settling in from the intense training before his last fight, and now, two days later, he hurt worse than he had right after the fight.

He reached for some GL3 L-glutamine, which would help fight the buildup of lactic acid. The bottle fell over, and he groaned as he reached for it, the bruises in his stomach making him want to curl up.

"You know, it's a good thing I do that janitor work," he told Goldie. "I mean, look at your old man here. If I didn't move after, I'd roll up and die, you know what I'm saying? Just. Die."

Goldie swam to the other side of her tank. Dane had gotten her a little bubbler since she looked like she couldn't breathe too good, and now she swam more. So he figured it helped her with her training, same as him.

"I saw him again, Goldie. Yeah. He talked to me. Thinks I'm..." Dane hummed, trying to put things into words. "Thinks I'm heroic, like this David dude. Only David really looked gay, you know? Not like any real gays I ever knew."

Goldie pecked at the little temple in her bowl. Dane had bought her an English castle, but she was shy; she'd pretty much stayed in there, so he didn't have a friend to talk to at all. And her job, as his fish, was to be his friend. So the castle was gone and now she had a Chinese temple, only she couldn't hide in it. She had to listen to Dane.

"He's got really fine skin. Like a baby's, I guess. Don't they say that? I dunno if it's exactly like a baby's, 'cause I'm of the bachelor persuasion, so I'm not sure if his face feels like a baby's ass or anything, but..." Dane chewed his lip. He closed his eyes and pictured putting the back of his hand against Noel's cheek.

"Ohhhh, ummmm. Better stop that kind of thinking 'cause there ain't no hot water. Not till they fix it again." Dane liked to take himself in hand in the shower. Seemed the man's way of doing it. Sometimes at night, if he couldn't sleep, he'd stroke himself, but there'd been nothing on his bed with him but old newspaper for so long that it made it worse, touching himself late at night with no one there. Made it feel like he was alone or something, which was very depressing.

He reached for a pencil and sketched Noel's eyes right over the wrinkled newspaper, humming to himself when he thought he got them right. Soft, innocent, they looked back at Dane, interested in Dane. He liked that! So he spent some time thinking how he might make it happen, to make Noel look at him like that again. Like working a strategy when he boxed, he wanted to find a way to win Noel.

"I'm like an optimist, you know?" he confided in Goldie. "I know he's not like me. Not even gay, probably. Maybe he was just bein' nice to me, not telling me off like some guys woulda." The thought discouraged Dane, and he looked around his apartment, which had just enough room for a table and chairs and his bed and the kitchen. He had a TV, but it was busted. He missed hearing the people talking on it in the background. He should get that fixed once he had a couple of bucks, instead of blowing it on a new leather jacket and glossy boots, but he'd thought he looked fine in them, and maybe Noel would like them. Maybe Noel would like Dane better in black leather.

"He has nice hair. That's what I noticed first." Goldie had settled at the bottom, and Dane leaned back on his pillow while thinking about Noel. "Soft eyes. Blue kinda. He wears these glasses, so it's hard to see them sometimes. I'd like to take those glasses off him. Yeah, what do you think? You think your old man has maybe a shot taking those glasses off? I wouldn't mess around or anything, just really, really want to look into the man's eyes. It would make sketching them easier, but then I'd also know if he sees me, you know, or if I should like, give up and try the clubs or something. But I don't want to do that. Don't want to fuck someone in the men's anymore." Dane glanced at Goldie. "Guess if he knew I did that, he'd not like me much, huh? But I get to just wanting someone's hands on me sometimes. Just so I know I'm like a real person or something. Like I matter somehow. You bein' a lady fish, I have to apologize for tellin' you stuff like that. I don't mean to be crude or nothin'; it's just your tough luck you got bought by a boy, so you get to hear stuff sometimes. Okay, Goldie, I can see you are riveted by this conversation, so I'm gonna go to sleep now. You want I should cover your bowl? I know you like that. Here." Dane put a couple of Kleenex over the side of her bowl and, leaning back, ran his hand over yellow newsprint. "You know I should really clean this place up. I mean, you never know. He might come here one day. He might. Wonder what he'd think of it?"

* * * * *

Noel mulled over all the things he'd read about boxing. That it had been prevalent in North Africa during 4000 BCE as well as the Mediterranean in 1500 BCE, when a Greek ruler named Thesus had been entertained by men who were seated in front of

each other and who had beaten one another with fists until one of them was killed; they'd actually worn a crude version of gloves.

"What are you reading, Noel?"

"Oh, I was..." Noel tried to block his father's view of the stacks of books.

"Boxing? That's hardly appropriate reading for your next doctorate. Here, I'll take them from you. Mrs. Edmonds made your favorite icebox cookies."

Noel peered up at his towering father. "I walked by a shop on campus today that sells contact lenses."

"You don't need those."

Noel watched his father dump his books with a derisive slap on the Queen Anne table by the door to the conservatory. "Boxing. It's a dirty sport for sweaty men. Really, this is as bad as those comic books I had to confiscate when you were younger."

Noel tried to return to the topic of the contact lenses. "I just think it might be easier for me if I—"

"No one cares how you look!" His father shook his head. "Have you had your swim yet?"

"Not yet."

"I'd like to see your leg now, Noel."

"Father, please. I'm not a little boy anymore."

"And I'm a physician, so I'll judge these things. Please go to your room and put on your swimming trunks. Then I'll look at it."

His throat tight, Noel obeyed.

* * * * *

A week later, Noel jumped when the door banged open in the library tower. He looked up and saw Dane. He carried a lazy man's load of his mop and bucket and some cloths for dusting. The door was weighted, so he was struggling with all his equipment. Before he'd even thought about it, Noel got up, hobbled over without his cane, and held the door for Dane.

Up close, Dane loomed over him. He was thickly muscled, and he smelled warm, like his big body gave off more heat than did other people's. His hair was tangled damply around his face. He smiled at Noel. "Hey, how you doin'? It's my man Noel!"

"I...fine. You should have made two trips."

"Naw. If I have to do that, it always feels like I'm doin' the same job twice, you know what I'm sayin'? So I like to get it over with all at once."

Noel nodded, a smile hovering uncertainly over his lips.

"Thank you for getting the door for me. It was very heroic. You are a sensational person, Noel."

Noel ducked his head.

"No, I mean that. I know people, and most wouldn't have bothered. Treat a janitor like shit, you know? Like you're not a real person."

"You are a real person." Suddenly, Noel found Dane too close, and he stepped back. The distance allowed him to see Dane completely. He was wearing tall black boots and a black leather jacket over his black wifebeater. Noel wondered why a man would wear such heavy clothing on a warm spring day.

"You like my leather?" Dane asked, putting down the pail and fishing around for the masking tape he used on the smoke sensor.

"It's winter clothing," Noel said, not thinking about it, but remembering it as one of his father's rules. "And it's spring now. Aren't you too warm?"

"Oh! Uh..." Dane looked away, flushing. "I know that. Totally didn't mean to wear it today, but I didn't got nothin' else back from the...you know, dry cleaners? Yeah, the cleaners. So I had to settle for this old stuff. That or show up here in the nude like your *David*, you know? And I don't think you're ready to see me nude."

Noel's eyes flared wide. "I, er —"

"I was just jokin' with you, is all. Just meant I didn't got nothin' else to wear today," Dane said.

"You should take off that coat before you clean, or you'll be overwarm."

"You mean I'm very hot? That's good." Dane shucked off the jacket and revealed the rounded curves of large muscles as well as a flash of lusty armpit hair. He was wearing a long silver necklace that disappeared under the wife beater. His skin was damp, so it clung to him, outlining the shape of his stiffened nipples.

Noel swallowed and returned to his table.

"I thought you and me could go for coffee," Dane said from the chair on which he stood to fiddle with the fire alarm.

"I don't do that."

"Don't go for coffee? How come?"

"Well, the only place here in the tower is in the basement."

"Yeah, and it's a really classy place, you know? I like that wallpaper they got with all the swirls, and those lights. I guess they are from somewhere else."

"You go there a lot?"

"Naw, can't afford it. Just like lookin' at it from the outside. Got no one to sit with anyway."

"You could go alone."

"I'd feel dumb, like I'd sit there at those chairs and everyone is wondering who's that guy, and why did they let him in here?" Dane laughed. He climbed down off the chair and fished out a cigarette, and then he hesitated. For the first time, he asked, studying Noel, "You mind?"

Smiling, Noel shook his head.

"Thank you very much. That shit about not smoking is fucked up. People gonna die early anyway from eatin' TV dinners and having microwaves and stuff."

"Well, most people appreciate consideration."

"Yeah, I know." Dane quirked a brow. "I'm sorry. You want I should put it out? I only smoke a bit when I'm workin', honest. 'Cause bein' a fighter, I got to knock off with them."

"No, have it. I don't mind."

"You are a really sweet person, Noel. Thanks so much."

Noel fiddled with his books. He'd done a lot of work earlier in the day so he could spend his time talking to Dane. "I read a little about boxing," Noel confided.

"Yeah?" Dane abandoned his supplies and came to sit next to Noel, turning a chair around so he could rest a brawny arm against it as he smoked and considered Noel. He was sitting close to Noel, and it felt unexpectedly comfortable to Noel, like he was a longtime friend. Yet it also made Noel nervous; Dane, after all, liked men, and Dane, with no subtlety, had told him that he liked Noel. "So you want coffee with me?"

Noel shook his head.

"Oh." Dane looked down at his cigarette.

"My leg... I just don't walk much, and the coffee shop is in the basement."

"You should work out with it more," Dane said.

"I swim."

"Yeah, that's good. Guess it's fine you can't go, anyways. Not like you want to sit in public with a bum like me, right?" Dane laughed.

Noel reached out and timidly touched Dane's wrist. He saw the way Dane looked at his hand and pulled away his fingers. "No, you are very...um, it's not that."

"It's the shy thing?"

Noel nodded.

"Okay, I'm not shy. Just in case you didn't notice, you know. So you are gonna have to let me know if I make you feel shy. If I do, I'll stop what I'm doin', okay? I mean, I do it for Goldie."

"Goldie?" Noel felt a sudden pang. Did Dane date other boys?

"She's my fish. Goldfish, so I called her Goldie. I'm actually not rightly sure Goldie is a girl fish. I mean, I have no idea what's buried under her fins, right? It's not like it's easy to tell if you gotta boy or girl goldfish, but I think she's a she. And I wanted to have a woman fish on account they listen more than boy fish." Dane took a deep drag, considering.

"I don't have any pets."

"Oh, yeah? That's a shame. Pets are really good friends to talk to. A man's apartment can really be...quiet, you know? So it's good to have a friend to talk to. Kind of like confession, except no priest."

"Are you Catholic?"

"No, I was, but I'm just a guy now. I was Catholic when I was a baby and didn't have no say in it, you know?"

Noel nodded. "I was raised United Church."

"You still go?"

"My father takes me to church every Sunday."

"Oh. Well. That's nice of him."

"Yeah, I guess."

"I always found church really boring. I get that I'm not supposed to fuck my neighbor's wife and stuff, though, so I guess it's good for that."

Noel cleared his throat. "The *David* comes from a religious story. He had to have a fight with Goliath, and he was much smaller, but he had his faith, so he was able to defeat his opponent."

"Yeah? That's cool! I didn't know they had no boxing in the Bible. It's maybe more interesting than I thought."

Noel smiled. "It has all kinds of stuff like that. And also, it doesn't make sense. And it says a lot of stuff about women that isn't very nice. Or so I think."

"You think about what you read a lot. Don't just read the ingredients on the Campbell's soup tin, huh?"

"Yeah, it's why I have a doctorate."

"That's cool. I don't have a doctorate 'cause I just read the labels and make sure it's what I need or don't need, you know? I get by with what I need. Listen, I gotta go to the bathroom. You be okay till I get back?" Dane's hand hovered over Noel's shoulder a moment, but he didn't quite make contact.

"Of course!"

"Sensational. Don't you go nowhere! Not like last week. I came by to see you, but you weren't here."

"On your day off?" Noel felt a pang. "You said you would be resting."

"How could I rest when I wanted to see you?"

Dane strode to the door, boots ringing against the worn hardwood.

Noel looked after him a long time, before he made himself open a book and try to read.

* * * * *

Dane was gone awhile. Noel found himself feeling impatient. His father's driver would arrive for him in exactly forty-seven minutes to take him home for the day, and it took Noel time to gather his things and leave the building. If Dane didn't return soon, he'd miss his chance to talk to him. About boxing, of course.

"Hey, hey, I'm back. I'm sorry I was so long. I went to the coffee shop. Sorry you couldn't come."

"Oh, they overroast their beans," Noel said, repeating what his father had told him. "It's not that great."

"Oh." Dane hesitated, a bag in his hand. He ducked his head. "I didn't know that."

Noel felt bad, as if he'd popped a child's balloon. "I wouldn't know myself. I just heard that."

"Well, I, uh, I bought you somethin', since you can't get down there yourself."

Noel's eyes widened. "Dane..."

"No big deal. Especially now you say it's just crap."

"No, it's not! I can't believe you did that!"

"Well, you couldn't go to the fancy coffee shop, so the fancy coffee shop came to you." Dane brought the bag over and put coffee and all kinds of condiments to go with it in front of Noel. With his big hands, he carefully laid everything out in a semicircle before he pulled out a long cinnamon twist and laid it neatly on a napkin for Noel.

Noel stared.

"You don't like cinnamon? I can throw it out if they overroasted it."

"No! No, I love it! Dane...thank you. No one's ever..." Noel took off his glasses, at a loss.

"Hey! I got you to take 'em off! Excellent! Go, Dane!"

"What?"

"Oh, I told Ms. Goldie I'd get you to take off your glasses for me so I could see your eyes. She said no way, but I did it. I'm the man, don't you think?"

Noel replaced them, not sure what to think, what to feel. "Yes, I think you are the man, Dane," he said softly.

Chapter Three

Tongue

"So I was thinking maybe...I dunno, pizza all right with you? I mean, pizza is so American, you know? And so...uh." Dane cursed and stared at himself in the locker mirror. He was stripped down to his damp boxing shorts, and his sparring equipment lay in a messy tangle on the bench behind him.

"Who you talkin' to, queer boy?" his trainer asked him.

"Someone very nice, who I hope to impress. I'm just tryin' to memorize some things, you know?"

"I thought you boys just fucked each other's asses? What's there to talk about?"

Looking away, Dane started to unwrap his sore hands. Charlie was all right. A lot of trainers wouldn't have anything to do with a guy who was up front he liked dicks more than tits. Only Dane's size and sweetness had saved him from being hurt bad, since generally boxers didn't like queers.

"I dunno, but this boy is really special, you know? And he may not even be gay. That's yet to be established."

Charlie laughed, his cocoa face creased with dry wrinkles that looked like they must crack painfully when he gave way to humor, his hair buzz cut and stark white against his dark skin. "Dane, no straight boy is gonna want anything to do with a big bruiser like you."

"Why not?" Dane asked. "I told him I'd play it like Bambi, wouldn't ever hurt him none."

Charlie shook his head. "One, because you are too big."

"I am big." Dane smiled proudly.

"You think any straight boy's pucker isn't going, 'Ouch, keep that big daddy away from me'?"

"Oh." Dane was deflated. "I didn't think of that none."

"And you've got no killer instinct, kid. Sweet as hell, yeah, but no one with any smarts will hook up with a third-rate fighter who's got big balls and no real education."

Dane didn't feel so good anymore. He rubbed his sweaty shoulders. "I guess you're right. I didn't...I didn't think it through."

"You never do, kid. You're a good boy, and I just...don't want to see you hurt again, okay? So that means you gotta be what? What have I tried to teach you?"

"To be realistic. To know my, uh, limitations." Dane finished with his hands, looking them over. They were rough and bruised and swollen—nothing like Noel's delicate, pale hands. Was Charlie right, and was Dane really kidding himself that someone as fine as Noel would ever want to go out with him? "I didn't know I was bein' unrealistic again. Thanks, Charlie."

Charlie clapped a hand on Dane's bare shoulder. "I just don't want to see you moping around here with another broken heart. So, forget about him!"

"Okay, I'll try. I'm not sure I can, like, right away? But I'll work on it," Dane promised his trainer. A smart fighter let his trainer do his thinking for him, and Dane always tried.

"You do that."

* * * * *

The day got worse when he went to the library tower expecting to see Noel, even though he knew Charlie was right and he was just bein' dumb thinking Noel would want anything to do with a big bruiser like him. But Noel wasn't there. The table where he always sat was silent and dusty, as if no one had been there all week.

Dane sat down, touching Noel's chair. There was a little piece of dried-up cinnamon twist Danish on it. He remembered Noel eating it and smiling at him. He'd seemed so happy, as if he really liked Dane.

* * * * *

"You're a big boy, aren't you? You like it rough, baby? 'Cause that's how I want it to go." Dane's date ran a hand over his thigh and up to his crotch.

Dane closed his eyes. "I don't like to do rough. I like it slow. Can we dance a little? Maybe you can tell me what your favorite color is or somethin', before we hit the alley or, uh, the men's?"

"Favorite color?" The bald man laughed, his gold earrings shaking. He had a tattoo on his head of Bambi, which was what had attracted Dane. "I just want to fuck."

C'mon, you got the itch, I can tell. Put your condom on here. Don't want to get ambushed where I can't fight you off."

Dane glanced around, but no one was looking, so he unzipped and stroked himself with the encouragement of his date, who offered him a condom. "Is that orange?"

"It's supposed to be glowing amber or some shit."

"Amber. That sounds like a color I ain't heard of before." Dane was delighted with the condom. His dick looked like it would glow in the dark. How cool was that? He stroked it, smiling at the color, and feeling his sadness lift a little. "I like your tattoo, by the way. It's very nice. Bambi ain't so easy to draw, you know."

"Whatever. Had a boyfriend who was an art freak."

"Yeah? I'm not a freak, but I like to draw some. But I guess it didn't work out for you. That's sad. Relationships are sad, you know? But I think it's worth tryin', even if—"

"Look, are we gonna fuck or what? I don't got time to chat with you. I picked you 'cause of your looks, not your mouth. You got a nice dick, and I want to feel it, so let's get it on before I get any older, okay?"

His throat clogged with feeling, Dane followed his date out to the alley. But he had one thing to say. "I wouldn't hurt you none."

"Whatever. Don't talk so much while we do it. Puts me in a bad mood. If I wanted to fuck some chatty woman, I wouldn't be gay, all right, pal?"

"Okay, that wasn't bad. A little vanilla, but not bad. Want a cigarette?"

"No, trying to quit." Dane felt worse than he had when he came here. *How come?* His eyes were aching, like they wanted to cry. He missed Noel. Would Noel be at the library next week?

"You felt really good, nice and thick, and I like the slooooow boys."

"Yeah? I'm not, like, too big, am I? Like, if you was straight, you wouldn't be...shy of my size or nothin', would you?"

"Dunno. I'm gay, so who cares what straights think? Don't know what they're missing, having a hot number like you up the ass, right?"

Dane closed his eyes, wanting a hug or a kiss. Anything but the feeling of being trapped in a body that made people not want to see him.

When he opened his eyes, his date was gone. All that was left was a little used yellow condom lying on the alley floor.

* * * * *

Dane climbed the stairs, his legs aching from his morning run. He was in training again, which meant he'd sprint for three minutes and then rest for three minutes. He

did this three times a week, and for the rest, he ran four miles. He was rebuilding muscle and getting ready.

"Dane!"

His eyes widened when he saw Noel sitting at his table. "Noel, it's June seventeenth, and you haven't been here since May ninth!"

"No." Noel ducked his head.

"Yeah, I counted and everything."

"I'm...sorry. I switched the days I came here."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I just...I..."

"You wanted to get away from me. I know it. It's all right. I'm dumb, but I ain't stupid or nothin'."

Noel's curls were tangled around his head softly. His glasses magnified eyes that didn't often climb as high as Dane's face.

"I needed some time, yes. I'm sorry if I hurt you, Dane. I didn't want to do that."

Dane shrugged. "You're a good person, so I know you wouldn't do that." He felt bad, though, knowing that Noel had wanted to get away from him.

Noel looked down at his books. "I'm not. I knew I'd hurt your feelings, but...I just needed not to be here for a while. My father would never understand."

"If you had a boyfriend, right?" Dane ached, but he tried to be a man about it. "Yeah, it's okay. I always fall for the straight boys, but Noel...I promised myself if I ever saw you again... Can I tell you somethin'?"

Noel swallowed, nervously playing with his textbooks, and after a moment, he gave a small nod. He looked as depressed as Dane felt, and Dane wanted to comfort him. Make him feel good, even if Dane didn't feel so hot.

Dane left his supplies and went to kneel at Noel's feet. Noel's eyes widened.

"Dane?"

"I just want you to know, that if you ever did honor me by bein' my boyfriend, I'd treat you like glass. These hands would never hurt you, never scare you. You'd be like...God to me, Noel, and I'd do what you wanted. Would never hurt you none."

"Oh, Dane." Noel played with his glasses. "I'm such a coward."

"It's A-okay. I started boyfriend huntin' again."

"Oh..." Noel wiped his eyes, looking even more morose. "How's that going?"

"Not too good, but I have high hopes that someone out there will like me, you know, someday. I'm a naturally optimistic-type person, you know? Like, I think good things will happen and stuff, only they don't usually, but I keep thinkin' they will somehow."

"I'm sure someone will really like you," Noel said in a choked voice. Dane wasn't sure, but he thought that maybe Noel was on the verge of tears. It made him feel bad,

since he'd thought what he was saying would make Noel know it was okay not wanting to like Dane.

"It helps so I don't think about you all the time, you know? Like, right now, I was wishing I was your boyfriend so I could kiss you and put my tongue inside your mouth. I'd stroke you with it, real slow, tastin' you, and it would feel really good to be inside you. I'd be so happy! But I'm in training to not want that."

"Oh!" Noel wiped his hands on his jeans. His eyes were really wide and blue, and he was staring into Dane's eyes. Dane felt himself getting hard from that look, so he thought maybe he better get up and get back to cleaning.

"I'm gonna go to work now, and I'm in training to be your friend, just so you know, so I'll knock off thinkin' about things like that. I'll try."

Noel looked really shaken. "Th...thank you, Dane."

"You're welcome! Told ya I'd do anything for you, didn't I?"

Chapter Four

Sub

"So you want to maybe come see me fight?" Dane was fiddling with his gear, not making eye contact with Noel. Two weeks had passed since Noel had started coming around again, and Dane had tried to be good. He couldn't help that he found himself sneaking glances at the other man. His eyes seemed to do it all on their own, and before he knew it — *bam!* — he had a stiffy.

It was really tough trying to train to be friends with Noel and not want to lay him over his table and kiss him like crazy. Noel wasn't helping any either. Dane caught him looking over in his direction a lot. Once when he was bent over dusting the art books, his skin prickled and he looked up, and he could have sworn Noel was looking at his ass.

Hard to tell, because Noel had eyes like mice; they ran away as soon they caught your attention.

"I can't believe you fight," Noel said now.

"Why d'you say that? I got a chin, you know?"

"Yes, I possess one as well, but I don't box." Noel was smiling. Dane swallowed. It was like the other man was flirting with him or something. Made it kinda hotter in the library than it was already.

"Naw, you know, a chin. Like I can take a lot of hits. Don't got no glass jaw. Lots of really prime contenders got promise, but you can lay them down easy."

"Do you?"

"Well...not exactly. When I fight, it's not what you call an exact science."

Noel sat with his chin cupped in his hand, listening. His curls were damp around his face, so he looked a bit like the angels Dane remembered from church. "Mmmmmmm?" Noel purred.

Oh, man. Purred. Dane would not be responsible for his actions if Noel made that sound again anytime soon.

"As I was saying before you made that...sound, which you shouldn't oughta do to a man in training, you know? Anyways, I don't always win. Sometimes...sometimes I'm the Man. I can take down anyone, like I'm flying, and it's as easy as breathing, you know? But others, I just don't got the heart."

"So if you aren't in the right frame of mind, you lose?"

"Well, I think it's like bein' off balance or something. You ever notice how when you are doing your thing, happy as shit, then some bad stuff happens, and you get to feelin' bad about it, and you want someone to make you feel better, like hugs-and-kisses better? You want your friends to be understandin', only they aren't, and if you have anything electrical, like...like a kettle, it will short out the same time all this bad is coming down on you."

"Off balance..." Noel was thinking about Dane's words! No one but Noel ever really did, 'cept Dane's trainer, but mostly he just told Dane what to do. Noel took off his glasses. "I've wanted to get rid of these for a while, and whenever I feel bad about...about how I can't walk like other people or how I wear them and not the contacts I really want, it seems like my father will say something that hurts me. Or I feel it more."

"He hurts you?" Dane came over and sat down. He put a gentle hand on Noel's wrist, and Noel blinked and looked at him, but Dane could tell he knew it was not a play to fool around. "I'm sorry. That's not good. You want I should talk to him for you?"

"No!"

"I promise I wouldn't hit him or nothin', on account he's your father."

Noel covered his mouth, shaking his head. At first, Dane thought he was crying, but then he saw Noel was laughing, which he guessed was good, but his eyes were also damp. Noel was like a rain shower, the kind of weather that was all confused, and he confused Dane, even as he made Dane feel good as a man. Feel good to be breathing and alive so he could look at Noel.

"That's...uh, very sweet of you, Dane, but I'm pretty sure he wouldn't listen. He thinks boxers are dirty, sweaty men."

"We are," Dane said. Then he blinked. "Do you think I'm dirty and sweaty? Is that why you don't want to let me get close to you?"

Noel shook his head vigorously. "I'm so sorry, I was... I'm in a bit of a wild mood lately, and I repeated something I shouldn't have and it hurt you. Please forgive me."

"Course I'll forgive you. I'm glad you don't think I smell bad."

Noel shook his head. "You are a very beautiful man," he said. Then he blushed, and the splotches of red in his cheeks delighted Dane.

"I like making you blush, Noel!"

"Ahem." Noel took off his glasses, wiping his eyes. "How is your...your boyfriend scouting going?" Noel asked him that whenever he saw Dane.

"Not too good. I had to knock it off on account I was very depressed."

"I'm sorry you were depressed."

"Well, I'm going to be honest with you, since I ain't got nothing to lose tellin' you stuff. I had a date with a man who had Bambi on his head, and I thought it would be nice, only it wasn't."

"A date? Did you go out with him?"

"Yeah, around back."

"Around back of what?" Noel looked confused.

"The club. He had amber condoms. I've never heard of amber before. I liked the color, but now it makes me sad. You know how it is sometimes with smells or colors that you always think of when they are mixed up with certain bad things? Well, now amber makes me sad, which is, you know, not amber's actual fault, so that's too bad."

"You...had sex with him?"

"Yeah, only it wasn't very nice sex."

"Oh," Noel said. Then, suddenly, he stood up. Gripping his cane in white fingers, he began to pace, while Dane watched him. "I don't like that you engaged in...intimacy with this man. You could have been hurt!"

"Naw, don't worry none. I don't think we was what you call intimate. I just fucked him like he wanted, but I used a condom."

"Oh." Noel looked ill.

Dane reached out impulsively and grabbed Noel's hand as he paced by him. He couldn't think with all the pacing distracting him. "You weren't around any. You didn't want me, remember?" Dane shrugged, feeling the edge of resentment flare a little at flirty, confusing Noel.

"I've been doing some research about..." Noel coughed. "I don't think I'm very gay. I tried to look at other men, like the dean? But I couldn't seem to find him attractive."

"Just how you're made."

"But I don't like you 'dating' in this fashion. I want it to stop."

"Why?"

"Because..." Noel's hands fisted.

"Look. I need things spelled out. If it's red, I stop. If it's green, I go. I need it like that, right?"

"Because...I don't want you touching other men or looking at them or even thinking about —"

Dane caught Noel and cut off his outburst. Noel looked pale and sick, except for the flags of angry color in his face. "Hey...hey, now." Dane stood and put his hands on Noel's shoulders, patting him so he'd calm. "You need to relax."

"Oh, dear me."

"Shhhh. Man, you are one tense dude, you know?"

"I'm not as bad as my father, I assure you." Noel laughed, embarrassed. "It's just that I'm so very...fond of you, Dane. It makes me angry if someone uses you."

"You always look unhappy when you talk about your dad, but he ain't here right now, is he?"

"No."

"So you don't need to think about him when you're with me."

Noel rubbed his forehead. "He's all I think about when I'm with you."

"I remind you of your dad?" Dane shook his head. "I know some guys like that, but —"

Noel shook his head, smiling. Smiling was good. Dane was glad to see it. "No...er...not in that sense. However, I have been reading this morning." Noel shifted to his books and held one out to Dane. It had a picture of two dudes wearing a lot of feathers. One was younger than the other, both male, and he was on hands and knees while his lover took him from behind. Dane felt color rise in his own cheeks, which he knew was dumb.

"From my anthropological studies, I remember reading about..." Noel cleared his throat. "Male Azande warriors married male youths who acted as temporary wives."

"Oh, yeah?" Dane didn't know what to say.

"A lot of my reading seems to favor a younger 'boylike' figure who is...the lover of an older man."

Dane's eyes widened. "Are you scared that I want you for my boy?"

Noel dropped the book. "No, I...erm...I was just reading."

"I don't want you to be my boy, Noel." Dane's voice came out throatier than he intended. It was all this talk about sex. He couldn't be responsible for how it made him want to nuzzle Noel and lick his skin like he was a cinnamon twist.

"No..." Noel gave a weak laugh.

"You're scared of me? I'd never hurt you, I told you that." Dane was hurt; he'd promised Noel he wouldn't hurt him, and Dane never went back on his word. Didn't Noel know that? "You know, being big, everyone I'm with wants me to do them. Sometimes they want me to leave bruises or something, but I don't like that. The truth is..." Dane broke off, not sure he could share this with Noel. What if he didn't understand it? What if it made him not like Dane even more?

"What? You can trust me, Dane. I'm trying to figure things out, but I know you are a very gentle person. It's why I sometimes forget you are a fighter."

"See, that's because you see me. Most people look at me and they see the body, the fists. You see me. It's why I like you so much, and why I got so depressed that you don't want me. 'Cause I think you'd be a very fine boyfriend for me."

Noel reached out and brushed back Dane's hair from his forehead. It felt good, like when his mother used to do that for him when he was little. Caring or something. "Tell me, please?"

"Well, I'd rather take it than give it, only no one I've ever been with expects that. I want someone to take care of me, and back when I let myself think about having, you know, sex with you, I thought about lying down for you. Thought it might be easier for you to be inside me. I'd let you do what you wanted so you'd feel safe. Told you I'd treat you like glass, so if we ever...you know, I'd let you inside."

"Oh!"

"You okay? You're all flushed like you got a fever or somethin'."

Noel took Dane by surprise by gripping his head and pulling it close to him. His eyes were a vivid blue, full of flames, like he was one of those people who thought he was right all the time. Dane looked into his eyes, and it was like seeing God or something, seeing Noel like this. He felt something shift inside him, but he didn't know what it was.

"I want you, Dane. You're all...all I think about. I am scared, and what I want is forbidden, and I know my father would never accept it, but when you offered yourself to me, I knew I wanted that. I want to have you... My God, almost to own you!"

"Noel, you're all wild and... You're sure you're yourself? Not sick or something?"

"No, this is myself. The real me. You bring it out in me. You."

"Oh." Dane's eyes widened as he found himself pressed against Noel's desk by this sudden predator. This was quiet, shy Noel? Dane had angled for this, back when he'd tried to make Noel his boyfriend, but now... "I'm...uh, very glad."

Noel laughed. "No, you aren't. Now, you're scared, a little. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I can't seem to think. Before I met you, I was... I couldn't even find relief easily. I get muscle cramps in my bad leg if I become overexcited, so I've since adjusted and trained myself not to think about sexual intercourse."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Dane said, eyes wide. He felt a bit intimidated by this new Noel. He wasn't used to feeling like that. Was this because Noel really mattered to him? It made him harder than he'd ever been in his life. Breathless. Waiting for Noel to do whatever it was he would do. "I just don't want you to be scared with me. I want you to feel...free. I'd even lay down on your table right now and you could do whatever you wanted with me, and you'd know you were safe."

"You'd place yourself under my hands and let me touch you however I want?" Noel's eyes still glowed, like the center of a gasoline fire. Dane felt himself burning, changed, from that look; Noel looked at him like he owned him.

"Dane, climb on the table now, please," Noel suddenly ordered.

In answer, Dane gently moved aside all of Noel's books on his desk while the heavy silence held, and then he climbed up on Noel's table, blushing a little himself. But he was a man of his word, so he lay down on his back and looked up at Noel. "I'm yours, Noel," he said.

Chapter Five

Daddy

"Bambi."

"Huh?" Dane lay on the table, his big doe eyes fixed on Noel, and Noel shook his fingers, as if to loosen them before playing with a favorite instrument.

"You said you slept with a man who had Bambi on his head. I don't understand."

"Well, first of all, there was no sleepin'. We were more...action movie than chick flick, you know? And he had Bambi tattooed on his head, so I figured he'd be a nice man."

"And he wasn't?" Noel was strung tight, Dane could see.

"No. Look, we have to talk about him anymore? 'Cause the heat I'm feelin' from you is you don't like to hear about it none."

"I don't," Noel said softly. He took his glasses off, placed them over the books, and then hobbled over to Dane, his blue eyes challenging. "I didn't understand where Bambi came in."

"Now you know."

Standing between his legs in front of the rectangular table, Noel curved a hand possessively around Dane's left ankle. He held Dane's gaze, and Dane felt himself grow even more excited. "I feel..."

"What? What do you feel, Dane?"

"I feel sexy," he said. "I mean, up on here, I feel like I can let go and just be hard, you know? Don't have to hide it no more, how you make me feel so much a man. And I don't feel dirty or not good enough. Don't feel like I'm not educated enough. I'm special now 'cause you told me to get on the table."

"I did choose you. I felt...smothered by my everyday life, and then I met you, and you chatter too much, so I couldn't block you out, but then I didn't want to anymore."

"I talk too much?" Dane looked a little hurt.

"Dane, will you take your clothes off for me?" Noel asked in a hushed voice.

"What, here?" Dane blinked.

"Yes."

"Isn't it...against the rules to be naked around all these books?"

"I don't think the books mind, Dane."

Dane gave an uneasy look at sun sparkling on dust motes through the tall windows. "Naked? In the daytime, Noel?"

"I thought you weren't shy?" Noel's hands were white where they gripped the table, and Dane could see it wasn't easy for him, asking for something. "You promised, Dane."

"I know but...all these books. I'm afraid they'll kill my mood, you know what I'm sayin'? Besides, what if someone comes in here and sees me naked with the books?"

Noel was fighting a smile. He picked up his cane and limped to the door, dug in his pocket, and took out a key. He pulled the door closed, locked it, and turned to look at Dane. "In this room, you're mine, Dane."

Dane saw that blue fire was back. He felt his balls tighten at that look. Claiming.

"Okay," he said. He'd wanted this, just this, to belong to someone. And he'd offered himself, been shameless in his boxer's strategy, trying to keep his feet until Noel saw him, chose him. But now...being claimed was so much more than he'd thought it'd be.

He sat up and hesitantly lifted his T-shirt, which had stuck to him in damp patches. His big chest muscles flexed as he pulled it off, and then, because it was a nice T-shirt—cost him five dollars, and it was his favorite color, blue—he folded it carefully.

"Do I got to take off my shoes as well?" Dane asked, his eyes down, a little shy because this was the real thing, offering himself completely.

Noel gave a wild laugh, which made a ripple of feeling slide through Dane's belly. "Yes. I want you. Totally. Naked."

Dane swallowed. "Help me take 'em off then?"

Noel returned slowly and then untied Dane's sneakers as Dane watched him. Dane darted little glances up at Noel and always met that blazing blue glare, so that his own eyes fell away with unaccustomed timidity. He was being taken. He knew it. He was rolling over easy for Noel.

Noel removed his shoes but didn't have to take off Dane's socks on account he never wore any. Dane put his hands on his jeans and then hesitated. "If I take off my pants for you, it means I love you a little, okay?"

Noel swallowed. "Love?"

"Yeah, see, I promised myself a long time ago I wouldn't screw anyone without caring about them, even a little, so I always find some kind of...love inside me before I take off my pants."

"So I'm no different from those other men?"

"No, you are. I'm just telling you that if I show you my parts, it's because I love you...as long as that's okay with you? I won't love you if you say I'm not allowed."

Noel stroked Dane's leg. "Dane, I'm not even sure that makes sense unless it's you."

"That's good, right?"

"That's very good."

"Okay then!" Dane fumbled awkwardly with his jeans. He was embarrassed because he just sprang out, like a jack-in-the-box, seeing how he never wore no underwear either. He looked down at his thick erection, trembling like some creature that was happy to be free, framed by his zipper.

And then there was a finger. Noel's finger. It ran up the length of his cock, to where he was wet tipped with feeling.

Dane gave a lusty moan and collapsed onto his back, forgetting he had to finish pulling off his jeans. He was on the verge of losing it, only from being on the table, under Noel's gaze, under Noel's touch. "Oh, man! I always knew there was more to you, you know, under the shy? I knew you would take care of me, make me so hot..."

"Mine."

"Yeah."

"You're so excited." The inquisitive finger stroked him again.

Dane shot.

His big penis trembled and then went off like a cannon, spraying Dane's muscled and sweat-slick belly as he lay helpless.

"My Lord!"

Dane felt exposed, as if his coming like that had opened up all his doors or something. "...didn't mean to."

"You are so responsive!"

"Yeah, I got real worked up too," Dane said. "I'm sorry, Noel. Now, I'm all messy, and you, you not bein' sure you're gay and all. I'm sorry." Dane was sure Noel would be disgusted with him. There would be no more Dane on the table, no more touches...

He jumped a little as a box of Kleenex was handed to him. Eyes down and cheeks flaming, Dane cleaned himself.

"I brought you to climax from just touching you like that," Noel repeated.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"No, you were...gorgeous!"

"I was?" Dane gave a hopeful smile. Noel didn't seem mad. His eyes were still blue fire, but he looked smug, as if Dane had done something he liked.

Noel's eyes softened, and Dane closed his eyes in pleasure as Noel's pale, cool fingers caressed his mussed-up hair. "You are a very good boy, Dane," he said softly.

"I'm glad," Dane said, full of the most perfect happiness.

Noel told him to get dressed again, and then Dane did his cleaning while Noel read to him, but all the time Dane did that, he felt a humming feeling between them.

When Noel unlocked the door again, after Dane had dressed, his eyes held Dane's, and Dane felt this secret between them. He was Noel's. He had been Noel's. Noel had brought him off.

"So my fight, you think you can come?" Dane asked anxiously. He so wanted to show Noel how good he could be in the ring. He would do really, really well tonight and win, if only Noel would come and stare up at him. See Dane as worthy of being his boyfriend.

"I...don't think I can. I promised to spend time with my father and some of his friends this evening."

"Oh. Well, that's okay. It don't bother me none. Your daddy is important to you. I get that."

Looking at his glasses in his hand, Noel gave a choked laugh, and Dane had the idea that maybe those glasses meant something to Noel. Something that made him sad. Dane had already been planning a surprise, but he vowed that tonight he'd go the distance so he could do something for Noel.

"Noel?"

Noel straightened, the laughter on his face smoothing away. "Father... I'm sorry, was I late?"

"Yes, you were, and I had to come up here to find you. I'm a busy man."

Noel stood, his face and body wooden, nothing like the Noel that Dane knew at all. "I'll gather my things."

"Who is this...person?"

"Hey, how you doin'? I'm doin' fine myself. You gotta wonderful son, you know that? Yeah, he's sensational."

Noel's father ignored Dane, raising an eyebrow at Noel, who flushed. "He's...the janitor."

"You were reading books with a janitor?"

Noel didn't look at Dane, who'd fallen silent, glancing from Noel to his father. "Yes, I'm helping tutor him." Noel swallowed, avoiding Dane's gaze. "Dane...can't read."

Dane looked away.

"Very well, gather your things." Noel's father went to the entranceway, making a quick call and barking impatiently into the slim little phone, which Dane figured cost more than his rent this month.

Dane glanced at Noel. "When is our next lesson?" he asked softly.

"I, uh, I have to go now..." Noel bent close as he passed Dane and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Hey, no problem!" Dane called.

Noel's father beckoned impatiently for Noel to follow him. Without looking at Dane, who was sitting at the empty table, they both left the room.

Dane stood. "Hey, it was nice to meet you, sir! And...and good-bye, Noel!"

When they reached the elevator, Dane heard Noel's father say, "You are not wasting yourself teaching some white trash—"

* * * * *

Dane got home from his fight.

He hit Goldie's tank with swollen fingers. "Hey, Goldie. Sorry I'm late with your fish flakes tonight, but you'd be very proud of your old man!" Dane shook some food into her tank. "Yeah, your old man won tonight. Did you proud. Gotta tell you them fish flakes smell, you know? Don't look that great to me, but hey, you like 'em."

He sat down, and his whole body ached. His kidneys were swollen, so he knew he would feel it every time he passed something for a few days. One of his ribs felt iffy. His bad eye was puffed up, and his fingers were swollen and clumsy, so he knew he wouldn't be drawing Noel's likeness on newspaper for a few days. "You mind givin' me a back rub, maybe? Maybe some ice? Yeah. Some ice would be good," he told Goldie. She was busy catching the flakes as they floated down like slow-falling snow through the little bowl. Dane watched for a while, feeling satisfaction that he'd done his job another day, and come back and put food on the table for someone, even if it was just Goldie. He figured it was a big step up from no one.

"Noel, he ain't got no Goldie. So that stuff he said about me? Don't bother me none."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his take. He had to count it twice carefully, on account his fingers were so stiff. He had enough for rent, food, a bus pass to work and the gym, and just enough for something special, something he really, really wanted. Because he'd been a winner, he had more than he'd thought he would. It meant he probably had enough now to visit the fancy contact lens store on campus. Buy Noel a gift certificate so he could wear contacts and not those glasses he didn't like.

"Oh, shit. Got some of my blood on the twenties!" Dane flashed the stained greenbacks Goldie's way. "Guess it's still legal, though, right? And now Noel can feel better about himself, you know? And it don't bother me none, him telling his father I can't read. I mean, fuck, far as he knows, I can't, right? So it don't bother me none. All

right, Goldie, I'm gonna turn out the light now since it's hurting my eyes. You get to sleep in tomorrow, so don't make no racket; your old man needs his sleep."

Chapter Six

Collar

Noel couldn't sleep.

It wasn't particularly unusual. Often, he woke from muscle cramps or nightmares or because he hadn't been active enough; he also suffered from frequent bouts of insomnia.

Tonight was different.

Tonight, he couldn't stop thinking about his forbidden fruit: Dane.

Noel knew that his father's outlook on life and the way he treated people – servants or employees of his massive business empire – had warped the thinking of his only son and heir.

Because now Noel felt a bit like Dane was his...servant, almost. As if Noel was someone who lived a long time ago, like a Roman aristocrat, and there was a slave he wanted, lusted after in secret, but could never acknowledge to his friends or family...

Rubbing his forehead, he wondered at his fanciful thoughts. His penis grew long as he remembered warm and lovely Dane spread out, dark eyes so trusting, misty with arousal. Noel knew he could do anything to Dane and Dane would allow it, something that aroused him as intensely as it seemed to arouse Dane.

It was as if Noel had held himself aloof all these years, indifferent, even a little pitying of the passions of others, and then he had met Dane, and his fascination was quickly turning into an obsession. His imagination was full of the things he wanted to do to Dane, now he knew Dane would let him.

He'd never thought himself a masterful person until he met Dane, but when those soft eyes were obedient and welcoming, it filled Noel with possessive pride. Dane was his. Dane was glowingly healthy, strong, sweetly confused, and untamed, and he had

given himself to Noel. Somehow, when Dane climbed on the table for Noel, it had shifted something inside Noel, as he knew it had Dane. As if their bodies were remembering an ancient dance, as if this was how it was meant to be, that Dane would look to him, and Noel would tell him what to do...

He got up and put on a modest robe, left his cane impatiently behind since its tapping on the hardwood might rouse his father, who slept next to Noel's room and left his door open at night so he could come to Noel's aid if Noel had a bad cramp.

Noel also had to keep his own door open. He wasn't allowed privacy except in his bathroom, and even there, he wasn't permitted to lock it ever, just in case. There was also a buzzer in Noel's bathroom, so he could summon help if he needed it. Once, he'd lingered too long in the bath, and his father had burst in to check on him. Noel remembered that had only been a year ago.

Now, he ghosted through the huge house.

His father regularly checked Noel's IP voyages at home on his own PC and laptop. His father's computer for business was password-protected. But in the guesthouse, across the outdoor pool, there was another computer provided for the comfort of any of his father's friends or business acquaintances.

Noel had been stealing there lately so he could to read about sex on the Net.

Tonight, he wanted to research master and slave relationships. He knew that he wasn't some kind of leather macho man, and he didn't like the idea of Dane's body all covered up, or wearing one of those masks he'd seen. Dane was beautiful. Gentle. That wouldn't suit him, though Noel had a feeling he could talk him into those things if he cared to.

Instead, Noel wanted to see Dane's eyes and his body. He didn't want it covered up with irritating and theatrical devices.

And yet...there were a few things Noel had learned that were helpful, and he'd begun to fantasize about Dane accepting them.

Dane wanted to be owned, so Noel had to find out how to give Dane the best care he could.

He had never been attracted to a woman, really, and never any men, so he wasn't sure he was gay. This obsession seemed to be all about Dane. As if Dane had woken Noel, like a sleeping prince of ice in a fairy tale.

Noel had needed to see Dane's sex and to handle it, and discovered that it hadn't put him off the idea of having sex with Dane at all. Watching Dane's untamed beauty spread out and helpless under his touch, so moved that he couldn't control his delight—

Noel rubbed his sweaty hands against his thighs and booted up the guest computer. He could only hope his father didn't watch the IP travel here, or it would be a little...disconcerting.

An hour later, Noel reached down and stroked himself delicately, trying not to arouse himself too hastily and bring on a muscle cramp. Lately, he'd touched himself more than he ever had in his entire life, as if he were a desert flower and he'd been saving all his seeds for the rain to finally fall upon him.

He had an idea for a special gift now for his Dane. His, now he'd claimed him. Something that would mark the occasion in both of their minds.

He would arrange it in the morning, if he could find time to slip away from his father.

* * * * *

Charlie wrapped Dane's bad rib. "Stop giving me that sissy look!"

"It hurts, Charlie," Dane said, pouting a little.

"You ain't fightin' awhile now, Dane!"

"Rib will heal."

"Dane..." Charlie shoved Dane's face in front of the bathroom mirror. "What do you see?"

Dane glanced through his two swollen black eyes and saw his face was covered in bruises. He met Charlie's straight gaze a minute before looking away.

"You took a pounding. I told you to stay down, but you didn't listen!"

"I knew I could win, Charlie!"

Charlie shook his head. "Dane, there is smart winning and dumb winning. Remember? I've taught you about that. That guy you fought was a real killer. You should have let it go."

"But I won!"

"Barely. And now you aren't going to be fighting again for a while. So how's that smart?"

"I guess it's not. I'm sorry, Charlie. I don't know why I didn't listen to you last night." Dane felt the pain worse now than he had when he'd come to see his trainer. He'd thought...Charlie would think he was like a war hero or something, with his bruises. He'd done good. He'd gone the distance. Instead, now Dane felt stupid and ugly.

Ugly.

"I can't go to work today," he mumbled, miserable.

"How come? No one cares what a janitor looks like, son." Charlie gave him a friendly pat on the back now he'd made his point. He was more affectionate with Dane than any of the other fighters, on account that he'd practically raised Dane.

"Because..." Dane bit his lip, avoiding looking at his own reflection.

"Ah huh! Your new boyfriend someone you met on the job?"

Dane nodded.

"You don't want him seein' you lookin' like this, huh?"

"He's not my boyfriend, but I've been working on him, trying to go the distance, you know? And I think maybe he started to think he'd like to have me, but now I'm ugly."

"You aren't very pretty now, Dane; that's true. Go home and rest. Look at it this way. At least your pretty ass ain't all bruised up, so if it's true love, he'll find a way!"

Dane glared. Charlie laughed.

Then, decision made, Dane headed home. He would miss Noel, but he couldn't think what choice he had. He couldn't let Noel see him like this.

* * * * *

Noel looked at the wrapped gift. He'd taken his time choosing the correct paper for it. Nothing silly, like balloons or puppy dogs. Nothing with too much color. The paper was based on old world maps, and he had a feeling that his Dane would be curious. Maybe ask Noel about the names of countries that didn't exist anymore.

Noel could tell him things, and Dane would listen, big doe eyes fixed on Noel's face, drinking in his every word. He assumed from what little Dane had slipped that he hadn't had much of a formal education, but Dane enjoyed being exposed to new things, new ideas. And Noel enjoyed playing the role of tutor or sharing his occasional poems. He loved how Dane looked at him, making him feel masterful, desirable...not the pale cripple he always felt under his father's roof.

He could hardly wait. He closed his eyes and shuffled his feet, thinking about Dane. Naked, beautiful, soft-eyed Dane.

Very soon he'd be here, and Noel would give him his gift.

* * * * *

On the third day of waiting for Dane, Noel suddenly got up, picked up his carefully wrapped gift, and walked over to the trash. He shredded the paper and broke the cardboard in half, and then he shoved it into the garbage.

* * * * *

"Hey, Noel! I'm so happy to see you! Hey, how are you? You look really...sensational."

"You didn't show up for three days! You could be fired for that," Noel said coldly, his back to Dane.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that... I was a little sore, so I took a few days off."

Noel turned around in his seat to look Dane's way. His eyes widened, and he stared.

Dane shifted, uncomfortable under that assessing blue gaze.

"Oh, this is nothin'. I've been...ha... Let me get my breath..."

"Dane, are you all right?" Noel was frowning at him, and Dane noticed his hand was clenched over the back of his chair. He got up suddenly and limped over for a closer look.

"Just one of my ribs. Charlie wrapped it, so when I climbed the stairs, carrying my janitor stuff, it winded me a little. No worries." Dane peered at Noel through his two badly swollen black eyes. He still avoided looking in the mirror the last couple of days, but he knew the bruising was lit up like fireworks playing over his skin. "It ain't nothin'. I been bad off before, and a fighter learns not to feel it, you know?"

Noel was staring at him with horror. It wasn't exactly what Dane had hoped for. "The way you're lookin' at me... Guess you don't find me so hot no more, huh?"

"No," Noel said. "I just... You look different. I'm not used to seeing you this way."

Dane ducked his head. "Oh. I, uh. Can I have a little bit of your time before I leave today? I have something I want to give you," Dane asked shyly.

Noel raised his brows. "I suppose. I don't like seeing you like this, Dane. You're moving like an octogenarian."

"That some kind of dinosaur, like a T. rex?"

"No, it means an older person, like elderly."

"Oh. Well, I don't know a lot of words, you know? I mean, I know enough to get by and all, but they are like the same old friends to me. You got all kinds of words that aren't my friends, so I haven't met them before."

"I have a doctorate," Noel reminded Dane absently.

Dane kept his head down as Noel took his wrist and led him to the table. He warmed a little, remembering what they'd done there, but now he felt like a puppy that had messed up off the newspaper, on account he was all marked up and ugly. Noel certainly wasn't looking at him the way he had the last time they'd been together.

"I want you to know, okay, that I can read," Dane blurted.

Noel nodded calmly. "Of course you can."

"Okay then."

Dane jumped when Noel's gentle hand stroked his own. "Are you in very much pain?"

"Naw." Dane felt good, being touched like that.

"I had all kinds of expectations about seeing you again." Noel frowned at his books.

"I thought about you too, man, all the time! I missed you."

Noel sighed. "Oh, Dane. I can't even stay mad at you, not when you look like a puppy afraid of rolled-up newspaper. I'm sorry you lost your fight."

"But I didn't! I won, Noel." *I won for you.* Only Dane didn't add that, since he couldn't tell what Noel was thinking. Was he mad at Dane? He'd seemed kind of mad when Dane first came in, but Dane couldn't think what he'd done wrong.

"Well, I'll leave you to your books." Dane got up and painfully began to scrub the room. He was conscious of Noel's eyes from time to time, but he was now so ashamed at how bad he looked that he never looked back. His throat was tight, and his eyes were burning.

Noel didn't talk to him.

In the trash, he discovered some shredded paper that looked special. He pulled it out, marveling at the maps. "Hey, Noel, look at this? It's like something from one of your books."

"Oh...yes."

"Someone ripped it. That's too bad. If anyone gave me a gift wrapped with paper like this, I'd save it and look at the paper. It's nice."

Noel got up and hobbled over. He pulled a broken cardboard box out of the garbage. "I was very...disappointed when you didn't show up, Dane."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you come?" Noel lifted Dane's chin so Dane had to meet blue fire full-on.

"I didn't want you to see me like this...all ugly. I was afraid."

"Why afraid?"

"That you wouldn't want me anymore."

Dane jumped as a cool, kind hand cupped his cheek. "I have something for you, but I need you to trust me first."

"Anything, Noel, you know that."

Noel nodded, his eyes a softer blue. "I haven't thought of anything but you for days."

"Me either. I mean, I haven't thought about myself, but you. I was afraid if I came here lookin' so bad you might not want me as your boyfriend."

Noel leaned close, reached up to give Dane a soft little nuzzle, and grazed his teeth over Dane's chin. It made Dane shiver.

"Take off your clothes for me?"

"Now? I'm all... I'm ugly."

"Dane?" Noel was stern. "I need to see that you are okay. I'm worried about you."

"Okay. You're kind of bossy; anyone ever tell you that?" Dane complained, but he was smiling a little as he peeled his T-shirt off and removed his shoes.

Seeing he was doing what he was told, Noel went and locked the door.

"I like that you see me that way." Noel was smiling a little now as well. "Everyone else sees me as weak because I use a cane."

Dane was naked, except for the bandage around his lower rib cage. He didn't think Noel would mind him keeping that on. He felt awkward standing there like that. Noel hadn't told him to get on the table.

Noel went to the cracked leather club chair and sat down. He still had the mysterious crumpled box, Dane saw. He wanted to ask Noel what was inside it. Noel patted the chair. "Come sit, Dane."

Dane's cock chose that moment to start rising, just from the sound of Noel giving him orders. He blushed at his reaction. He saw that Noel noticed, since he could hardly hide it.

He sat, giving a groan as his belly muscles flexed. Noel helped him adjust so he was sitting on his lap, over his good leg. He opened Dane's legs and spread them up and over the sides of the chair. Still blushing furiously, Dane let himself be arranged, aware of his erection bobbing between him and Noel.

"Dane, look up at me, please," Noel commanded.

Dane saw the soft blue in Noel's eyes. He relaxed a little. He was used to being nude around other men, but with Noel, it was different. And he'd never sat on someone's lap before like this. Naked while the other man still had his clothing on.

Noel stroked his hair and then his jaw. "You are not ugly."

Dane swallowed.

Noel gave him a sharp little slap on his open thigh, and Dane gasped. "Pay attention! You're not ugly. You could never be ugly. You're special. Gorgeous."

Dane's lips tipped up hopefully. This was almost as good as the table! "I am?"

"Oh, yes. Do you want your gift now?"

Dane nodded.

"Say please, Dane. I want you to say that whenever you want something from me from now on." Noel's eyes were sleepy, and his pale face was flushed. He wasn't as stiff and formal as he had been when Dane first entered the room. It was like they became their real selves alone together. Dane, liking to be taken care of, and Noel, secretly masterful.

Dane nodded. "Okay, please."

Noel pulled his head down again and nuzzled him. Dane shivered. "So beautifully responsive," Noel said. "Here is your gift."

Dane frowned, not understanding why his gift had been in the trash, but maybe Noel had made a mistake and put it there by accident.

Dane pulled out a blue strap with sparkling stones. It had a little buckle. It was too small to go around his waist. He frowned. "What is it?"

Noel gave a shy smile. "The stones are aquamarines. I chose them specially, and I had my name sewn on it, see?"

Dane saw the stones spelled NOEL. He still didn't see what the gift was for.

Noel took it from him, pursing his lips. His face was soft and relaxed, Dane saw. Just like how he'd been when Dane was on the table. It was funny, because despite his boner, Dane felt the same way.

"Bend closer."

Dane obeyed, and Noel put the little strap around his neck and buckled it so it rode high on his throat. Dane blinked and then pulled at it a little to see.

"It's a pet collar. Not just any pet, I bought one used for exotic cats," Noel said. "And my name's on it. It's your favorite color, blue... Do you like it?"

Dane nodded. "It's pretty! Thank you, Noel."

"When you wear it, I want you to remember how gorgeous you are, and how we are together, when we're alone."

Dane felt his heart light up.

Noel pulled him close, seeming to understand, reading Dane in some mysterious way. He stroked Dane's back soothingly. Kissed him in that sensitive place between his neck and jaw. "Do you want me to get you off again, gorgeous Dane?" Noel asked him.

Chapter Seven

Owned

"If I let you do that, will you respect me, Noel? 'Cause I'm sort of on the easy side," Dane said, fussing.

Noel circled a lazy finger around the rim of Dane's cock.

Dane gripped the chair arms and raised his hips, begging for more touches.

"Very easy. I have a fantasy. Do you want to hear what it is?"

"Ummmm, okay." Dane tried to concentrate on words while cool fingers continued to play with his weeping sex.

"Once upon a time, back in ancient Rome, I was a general. Like Julius Caesar. Do you know who he was?"

"He got killed. And he was Cleopatra's boyfriend, maybe?"

"Yes, he was, and well...I don't get killed."

"Okay."

"Maybe you are some slave from a conquered nation. You've served my family for a long time, but I've always liked you."

"Noel!"

Dane squirmed as Noel played more aggressively, pinching his nipples and then his length at the base. He bit his lip and tried to be good and not move, since whenever he did, the gentle touches stopped.

"Good. Don't move, and Daddy will play with you." Noel bit the underside of his neck, sharply, leaving a little burning feeling so that Dane knew he'd been marked. "Now, where was I?"

"Uh. Julius Caesar?"

"Yes. So we'll say you work in my gardens. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I like plants, but I'm not very good with them. I sort of forget they're alive, you know? And then they aren't, on account I didn't water them any."

"Well, since you're a slave whose job it is to tend to my garden, we'll say you do a pretty good job, okay? Because you're a very able janitor, and you seem passionate and knowledgeable about boxing, so I think you'd be very competent as my personal groundskeeper."

Dane looked pleased. "Okay."

"One day I find you in the garden by yourself. You're...touching yourself. Like this—" Noel's finger danced around Dane's opening, which was easily accessible from his vulnerable position. A finger broached Dane, and he shuddered.

"Oh, Noel!"

"Like me inside you, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Have you let anyone else fuck your pretty ass, Dane?" His voice was harder, like when Noel talked to Dane about Bambi man.

"No... Everyone I've been with expects me to do them, I told you. Besides...I was a little..." Dane swallowed, loving that finger just inside him. Noel began to rub gently.

"Yes? Tell me. I want to know everything about you now. You're mine, Dane."

Dane could no more hold his thoughts closed than he could his body. "I was a little afraid of bein' owned, you know? Like, I might be hurt."

Noel's face was serious. His blue eyes were soft and yet sharp at the same time. How did he do that? Dane wondered hazily. Dane felt like he was some kind of...recipe that Noel was playing with. Like, when Dane tried to make pancakes a different way, he put in different stuff and watched to see what happened. Noel was kind of like that now with Dane, but Dane didn't mind.

"Very wise, I think. You're so open" —the finger went deeper—"that you need a good owner. I read up about how to be one for you, because I want to make you feel good." Now Noel's eyes were vulnerable. "I'm...not sure I know how precisely, though."

"Noel, I'm yours, I told ya. I won't take it back none..." Dane's legs spread even wider as he leaned back to allow Noel to take him any way he wanted. This was better than anything Dane had ever felt. "Knew you would be a good boyfriend for me," he said. "So what happens to me, when you find me doing wrong things to myself? Do you spank me?" Dane flirted.

Noel's eyes flared hot blue at the word *spanking*. He took a deep breath. "Something about you..." Noel cupped one of Dane's cheeks. "You enchant me, and I'm under your spell."

"Yeah?" Dane looked proud. "I did good back then, didn't I?"

Noel swirled his finger deeper into Dane's giving heat, fucking him a little. Dane's throat muscles strained as he threw his head back, and his lips parted in happy ecstasy. Noel attacked those flushed lips, as if wanting to be inside Dane completely. "I want to feel what it is to be so trusting, so gentle," he muttered against Dane's skin. "I want your magic, want to take it through our kiss."

This was too much for Dane, who broke away suddenly, cheeks burning. "Oh s-shit! I made a mess on your pants, Noel! I'm sorry. All that stuff you said about taking me..."

Noel studied the result of Dane's hasty passion but looked smug, not annoyed with Dane.

He pulled him close, into a tender hug, his face relaxed as Dane wrapped his arms around him and cuddled him back. Dane's new collar sparkled dimly in the afternoon light, the blue stones full of soft fire. "Nothing to be sorry for. You look like an angel when you come, Dane. My gorgeous, slutty angel."

* * * * *

Noel's father, Arthur Atherton, looked over the spreadsheet of IP travels on the guest room computer. He turned to his aide, Morrison. "You're sure there is no mistake? My son purchased a...kitty collar?"

"Yeah, and it doesn't look like it was for any cat, sir. He had it engraved with aquamarines, spelling his name." Morrison handed Arthur the profile he'd done on Dane Connelly. "Your son is spending all his free time up at the library when this man works. They stay there for hours. I think it's safe to say they are having an affair."

"My son is *not* fucking some homo! He's *not* gay, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's this...trash he's fallen in with. Noel has been protected and cosseted, and of course, he's curious. As a man of privilege, he's taken someone from the lower class as a sort of...experiment, but he's not gay, and he's not going to be gay."

"No, sir."

Arthur's fingers clenched. He'd been drunk behind the wheel that long-ago night, the snow sliding under the tires before the car hit the tree. Carrie had bled to death, and in the backseat, Noel screamed, his leg crushed. Leaving his dead wife and his badly injured son, Arthur had gotten out of the car and walked four miles to summon help. Afterward, through all the painful months of operations and therapy, he'd made sure that Noel knew that he would walk again. And he had. Now, Noel was in danger again, in danger of making a disastrous mistake. But Arthur would take care of him, as he always had.

"Get the homo fired from his job." He snapped the photo of Dane facedown.

"Not easy; the campus has all kinds of human resources stuff, advocates and all that—"

"I pay that fucking school a lot of money, so don't tell me I can't get some white trash kicked off campus for preying on an innocent boy. If Noel were younger, I'd have this man up on charges for...for enticing my son!"

"Sir..."

Arthur wiped a shaking hand across his mouth. "I want to see the den where this filth lives. Find out where it is, and get me over there today. I'll make sure he doesn't come near my son, once and for all!"

* * * * *

"So you gonna let me take you to the beach soon, Noel?"

Noel loved that Dane never pushed him. Noel wasn't sure he was ready to expose his flawed body to this perfect dark god sitting on his lap, though he had never felt more of a man. He'd made Dane come again. He'd taken care of him. It didn't matter that he was trembling from his own repressed lust. Dane didn't push.

Noel closed his eyes, pictured being daring enough to sit up and open his pants and then rub himself against Dane's velvety skin to bring himself off. He wanted to leave his semen on Dane's skin. It was a barbaric feeling, but he couldn't help how wildly possessive he was about him.

"Soon, I promise. My father will be coming, so I can't stay."

Dane's eyes dimmed a little. "He didn't like me much."

"He just doesn't know you."

"I don't think he wants to. I think your father is like Julius Caesar, like in your fantasy? Only he isn't nice. He just sees me as white trash."

"Don't use that expression!" Noel's lips tightened. "You heard him. I'm...sorry."

"It's okay; it don't bother me none. I know I'm not class like you. But you carin' about me a little makes me feel good. It's all I ask for. I don't need nothin' else."

Noel laced his fingers through Dane's hand. "I don't think about you that way."

"Yeah, but...you told him I couldn't read." Dane laughed.

"Dane, I told him that to protect you... My father's very possessive. It's best he doesn't know about you, how...attached I am to you."

"I'm big and strong, Noel. Don't you worry none about me. I can take care of myself. Take care of you too, which reminds me." Dane got up and stretched, obviously a little shy over his returning enthusiasm. Noel made no secret of admiring him as he walked over and retrieved his offering out of his jeans pocket and brought it back to Noel. A crumpled piece of paper.

When Noel opened it, his eyes widened. "Dane..."

"You like it? You're happy? I don't know nothin' about fancy stones or anything like what you got me – and no offense? – but I don't think I'll wear your gift, like, all the time or nothin'."

"No, it's meant to be when we're private." Noel smiled. "But this...Dane, it's too much!"

"Naw. I won my last fight for you, Noel. That guy, he tried hard to put me down, and he was way bigger than me, but I kept my feet, and I poured it on. I mowed him down for you, Noel!"

Noel put down the gift certificate for the contact lens shop he'd wanted to visit for so long and reached up to give Dane a kiss. "I'm...crazy about you, Dane," he whispered. "But this is too much, and I can't accept it."

"Sure you can."

"But...you have so little."

Dane shook his head. "For a smart fella, you miss some of the important stuff, Noel. I got you. I got Goldie. I get to take care of you both, so that makes me very well-off, I figure. Better off than anyone. Don't you get that?"

* * * * *

The landlord watched from the doorway as Arthur strode into Dane's apartment. "Shouldn't let you in like this... He's a good tenant. Nice kid."

"He's a fag."

"Yeah, it ain't no secret, but even though he's just a working-class Joe, Dane's sweet."

"Working-class Joe?" Arthur's fingers trembled. The place was tiny and slightly messy, but not the filth he'd expected. The window was open, letting in fresh air. Some wildflowers stood in a drinking cup on the little kitchen table. Arthur gave them a contemptuous glare. "Dandelions. I suppose he is a lout if he doesn't know those aren't real flowers."

Arthur gave the little vase a shove, so the glass rolled off the table and shattered, and the bright yellow weeds were left in little pools of water.

"Hey!" The landlord was shoved back by Morrison, who pulled out a fifty and cocked an eyebrow.

The man took it. "What the fuck ever, but don't break anything else. I'll give you five more minutes." He stomped off, leaving Arthur and Morrison alone in Dane's little closet of a home.

Arthur was looking with contempt at the pictures of boxers taped to the walls. He reluctantly admitted that it was a small shit hole, but a clean one, except for some old newspapers spread out on the rumpled bed. That bed filled Arthur with revulsion. Had his boy been here? Had he let himself lie under that huge hulk?

Sickened, he noticed something else by the bed. The one bright, beautiful object in the room.

A goldfish.

The homo had a pet.

Chapter Eight

Comfort

"Is N-Noel there?"

Noel frowned. He'd only left Dane half an hour ago. He'd given him his cell phone number and had obtained Dane's address in return. He wouldn't risk losing touch with him again.

"Dane, are you okay?" There was something wrong with the connection, or Dane was breathing heavily. Were his injuries from the fight bothering him? Noel sprang up, knowing he was going to go check on his Dane, and never mind his father expected him at dinner tonight.

"Noel, I did something bad. I'm dumb, and I messed up, and now...she's dyin'!"

Noel felt his gut tighten. "Dane, hold on. Hold on!" He put Dane on hold and called for his father's driver. He could take a cab, but he didn't want to wait. He needed to get to Dane. Now.

"What's happening?" he demanded as soon as he had Dane back. "Is it your mother or...?" He realized he didn't know a thing about Dane's family. *Fuck.*

There was a raw sound, as if Dane were fighting tears. Noel felt sympathetic upset rise. *Dane.* Why was he hurting like this?

"It's...Goldie. I got back, and she weren't in the water. The bubbler got unplugged somehow, and she must have jumped out of her bowl to get more air. Noel...I don't know what to do!"

"Hold on, baby," Noel ordered gruffly. "I'll be there soon." Noel got into the car and scribbled the address to the driver, Gilbert, impatiently. "Get me there fast!" he snapped.

"I gotta go. I'm usin' my neighbor's phone, on account I ain't got one. I have to go back to Goldie now."

"Dane, gorgeous, I'm on my way!" Noel's throat tightened at the deadness of Dane's voice. "I'll take care of you."

Noel climbed up three passages of stairs to Dane's apartment. He found Dane easily, since the door was standing open.

Leaving his cane, Noel limped to Dane, who was sitting on the floor beside his bed, his head resting on his knees.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Noel lifted Dane's face, which was battered from bruises and shiny with tears. On impulse, he kissed Dane, tasting warm salt and heartbreak. "Dane, tell me what's wrong, and I'll fix it. God, I'd do anything for you!" He stroked Dane's hair and pulled him close.

"G-Goldie...!" Dane pointed to a small round fishbowl, which was bubbling away. At first, Noel couldn't see anything, but then he saw a small gold and red fish resting on the bottom.

"Is that your friend?" he asked gently, stroking Dane's tangled hair back from his face.

Dane nodded. "I ain't got no money for a real pet, like a dog; doesn't matter what people say about her, she's real to me, you know? I've had Goldie for three years now, only I'm stupid, just like everyone says I am!"

Noel shook him. "Stop saying that about yourself! What happened?"

"Dunno. The...bubbler thing I got her was off when I got in, and she was...she jumped out of her bowl onto the table. I found her just...lying there."

Noel saw some splashes of water around the little tank.

"It wasn't your fault."

"It was! I killed her 'cause I'm too dumb to take care of anyone! Even the pet-store owner didn't want to sell me anything on account he knows I'm not too smart."

"You aren't stupid!" Noel resisted an insane impulse to find the pet-store owner and...and punch out his lights!

Dane sagged, curling into the fetal position on Noel's lap.

Noel lifted his chin so he could stare into dark, bruised eyes. "I'm going to fix this; you did the right thing calling me, gorgeous."

"You can't fix it, Noel. She's...she's dyin', I know she is, and it's my fault." Dane pressed his face against Noel's neck.

Noel thought furiously as he looked around and saw there was broken glass on the floor. Dane was barefoot, so he warned him. "Stay here by the bed."

"Are you goin' to leave me?" Dane asked him.

"No, sweetheart! I'm going to make some calls. I'll take care of you, all right? And, Dane, calling me was a smart thing to do. For you and for Goldie."

Dane nodded, but his eyes were as dull as two black stones. "O...okay."

Noel growled his frustration before getting carefully to his feet.

Just outside Dane's little apartment, he leaned against the wall. He was angry. Not at Dane, but at life for hurting such a vulnerable innocent. Dane's fish was probably going to die, and he knew Dane wouldn't forgive himself if that happened.

Noel came back after a few minutes and put his arms around Dane. "Someone will be here soon," he murmured into rumpled brown hair. "I'm going to make you something... Tea, do you have that?"

"I don't know." When Noel touched his hands, he found they lacked the warmth he was used to, and were icy cold. Dane was in shock.

"Oh, gorgeous." Shoving some old newspapers aside, Noel helped him onto the bed. He lifted a sheet over Dane. "I'll find something for you."

Dane had an ancient package of Red Rose tea buried in the back of his almost empty larder. Noel felt his heart tug when he saw Cap'n Crunch cereal sitting right next to an unopened package of Trojan condoms.

It was so Dane, Noel thought, even as jealousy rose. Who were the condoms for? One of the men who made his Dane perform like he was their sex toy?

Closing his eyes, he knew that too many people had hurt this man for him to ever find them and beat them all up, and he was just one slight, crippled man. It didn't matter. If he heard anyone dis Dane tonight, he'd fucking rip out their throat!

He made tea and laced it with lots of sugar. Dane didn't want to drink it, but Noel was firm. Then he pulled his Dane into his arms and waited for the first of his visitors to arrive.

The man from Wild Aquariums came first. He hefted in a large brown box. He had an assistant with him. "That the fish?" he asked Noel.

Noel nodded. "Something's wrong with her tank...and she jumped out."

"Oh." The man knelt and looked at Goldie, who was lying at the bottom, breathing while her little fins moved only from the rippling water. "Well, goldfish can take low water, so if she wasn't out long, she might make it. Depends on whether she got all busted up from the fall."

Noel nodded. Dane had his eyes tightly closed, one big fist wrapped in Noel's shirt. He had seen the men but had turned away when they began discussing Goldie's condition, as if it were too painful for him. He was leaving it all to Noel.

"I see. Is there anything you can do for her?"

"Can put some stuff in the water, like antibiotics for fish. And I brought the other you asked for."

Noel nodded.

Dane held on to Noel and didn't speak as Goldie was carefully shifted into a brand-new seventy-five-gallon tank that the aquarium men placed on the custom stand that occupied several square feet in Dane's tiny apartment.

Noel gazed at it dumbly. Perhaps seventy-five gallons was too much room for one sick little fish? He didn't care. He'd have bought anything to save Dane's fish. Anything for Dane.

After the tank was set up and the water was fixed with chemicals, the man carefully moved Goldie, putting her into a little plastic bag that had tiny holes in it; this way her water and the tank water would balance out and not send her into shock, he explained to Noel. "This water is well oxygenated and full of the things she needs to recover. I've done what I can for her."

"Thank you," Noel said.

"No problem... I'll be back in the morning to check on her, and here's the other one." A small box with another tank was revealed. Inside was another goldfish, this one black and scarlet. It had long fins and looked like something from a fine Japanese watercolor. Noel nodded. He signed the payment chit, and the men left.

Dane hadn't looked up to see the new tank that took up most the room. As he sat curled against Noel, the watery green light reflected patterns on his swollen face and the fresh tears that kept seeping from his scared heart.

* * * * *

Noel's doctor checked Dane's pupils. "He's fine, Noel. Just looks like severe emotional shock."

"Can you give him anything?"

"He's not my patient."

"You work for me and for my family." Noel's voice had a snap that his doctor had never before heard from the subdued little blond. "I want him to be able to relax...and sleep."

Reluctantly, the doctor left some pills.

Dane fussed, but Noel made him take them.

* * * * *

Dane rubbed his head groggily against Noel. He felt the great, gaping hole of his own pain and regret for hurting Goldie trying to swallow him again. He was all cried out. His eyes felt hot and crusty from his tears, and still all that crying hadn't made him feel any better. Not even Noel being there and holding him helped. He wanted to curl

up in a dark closet. He didn't deserve anyone being nice to him because he'd hurt his friend. He hadn't meant to, but he had, and all his crying couldn't change that.

"Please don't die, Goldie," he whispered as fresh tears welled.

Pulling him into a tight hug, Noel kissed him.

Dane wanted to die if his Goldie died and it was his fault.

Chapter Nine

Mistake

"Dane! Are you fuckin' deaf or what? Come get the door!"

Bam! Bam!

Noel shot awake, feeling his arms giving pain messages from holding Dane all night. He blinked at Dane, whose hair was wild around his unshaven face. He looked like puppy boy met Marlboro Man.

Dane got up, nude, and walked to his door. Without checking with Noel first, he flung it open.

A tall black man strode inside, his cocoa eyes taking in Noel. "You the boyfriend?"

Noel's face was scarlet. He glared at the intruder.

"That hasn't been exactly established yet, but I'm Noel's," Dane said. His eyes were bloodshot, and his hands trembled as he rubbed his muscled thighs.

Noel's throat tightened despite his acute embarrassment at Dane's nudity.

Innocently, Dane retraced his steps and reached for Noel's hand. "He's taking care of me."

"That so?" The black man glared back at Noel. "You hurt this boy, and I'll break your face!"

"Same goes," Noel growled.

The man's eyebrows rose. "Hey, Dane, you finally manage to bring home a keeper?"

Noel stiffened, and Dane whispered to him, "Don't be mad, Noel!"

"Dane and I..." Noel swallowed. "He's mine," he finished simply.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then." Respect shone in the brown eyes. A hand was held out to Noel. "I'm Charlie, and Dane also belongs to me."

Noel bristled.

Charlie laughed. "I'm his trainer, man! I'm a little old to be his boyfriend, don't you think?"

Noel looked at Dane, who was observing the byplay like he was watching television. "Not for Dane. He...doesn't go by that."

Charlie's face softened as he looked at Dane. "No, he don't. So what gives? You were supposed to come round so's I could have a look at that rib."

"I'm sorry." Dane swallowed, and his eyes filled with tears. He looked down, obviously unable to speak.

Noel gripped his forearm, pulling him close. "Dane, put on your pants," Noel ordered gently.

Dane blinked at him. "I always go naked in my apartment, Noel."

"No, you used to go naked in your apartment. Now you'll only be that way..." Noel blushed, but his eyes were steady. "When we are alone."

"Okay." Dane reached for his jeans, looking so miserable that Noel pulled him into his arms for an awkward kiss.

"I'm jealous," he whispered for Dane's ears alone. "Because you are so very gorgeous. All right?"

Dane's face brightened. He looked pleased. He nodded and put on his jeans, not zipping them, but at least covering the essentials. Noel felt himself relaxing. It was very odd, but he didn't like other men seeing what he saw. He wanted Dane's beauty to be his alone, like a dragon with the gold he hoarded.

"His goldfish suffered a serious mishap," Noel told Charlie.

"That right?" Charlie's voice softened. "I told you. You need a dog or somethin', boy. I mean, fish die all the time; it's what they do!"

"She's m-my friend." Dane was still staring at the ground, shamed by his tears.

Charlie heaved a sigh. "I want you to come to the gym today."

"Charlie, please —"

"No. Truth is, she got to fight this out on her own, eh? I mean, is she alive, your fish?"

Dane nodded. "I been watching her. She's still down near the bottom, but she's breathing, and her fins wiggle sometimes."

Charlie went over to the two aquariums, looking at the seventy-five-gallon one in awe. "Jesus's underwear, where the hell you get this, boy? You bend over for that pet-store man?"

Dane shook his head.

"What?" Noel demanded.

Charlie gave a crack of laughter at Noel's reaction. "You've got a fighter's heart, kid. I like that."

Noel skewered Charlie with burning blue eyes. "Who is this pet-store man?"

"He took a fancy to our Dane, that's sure. Offered him a puppy for a date."

"Dane, you didn't!" Noel looked at Dane, worried that he could have been enticed because of his sweet nature.

"No, that weren't right. If he wanted to get down, okay, but he...made it out like he wanted me to work for him. Like takin' money or somethin', and I'd have to do what he wanted. It weren't right."

Noel cupped Dane's cheeks and pulled his face down close so he wouldn't miss the shadow play in those dark eyes. "Has anyone ever wanted you to do that? Sell yourself?"

Dane swallowed and avoided Noel's feral gaze.

"Fuck! Anyone does that? Asks you for...things, you tell them to talk to me, is that understood?"

Dane's brow furrowed. "I can take care of myself, Noel."

Noel huffed out a sigh. "I...know. It's just that I'm new at being a boyfriend, so I'd appreciate it."

Dane nodded. "I promise."

"Okay then." Noel's stiff shoulders relaxed.

"Heh. He's a subby one, ain't he?"

Noel gave Charlie a sharp glance, and Dane's mouth dropped. "How'd you know I...uh..." Dane blushed.

"I train you, boy. You don't think I know how you like to be told what to do?" Charlie shook his head. "I've been worried for a long time you'd meet the wrong sort, who would just want you doin' things for him, but he wouldn't care for you none."

"I had a lot of dates." Dane remembered how none of them worked out.

"Yeah, but that's good, see, 'cause none of them got their hooks into you. You lead with your heart. Say, what's with the broken glass all over the floor? A fighter has to protect his feet."

Dane looked at the shards under his kitchen chairs and frowned. "I don't know. I don't remember breaking nothin'."

Noel took a closer look. "What's this?" He bent his bad leg carefully to pick up a browned yellow flower.

"Dandelions. I like butter, see?" Dane put the shriveled petals under his chin so it reflected a yellow glow on his unshaven jaw.

"What were they for?"

"Flowers. You know, to brighten the place up?"

Noel watched as Dane picked up dandelions and shards. "That's nice, but how did they wind up on the floor?"

"I...don't know. Never noticed, Noel. Maybe it got windy and they fell over?"

Noel looked at the open window. He frowned. "Was the door locked when you got home? No one had been by here visiting you?"

"It was locked, I think... I can't remember too much, because once I found Goldie—"

"The bubbler was pulled out of her tank?"

Dane frowned. "It was off."

"Unplugged?"

Dane nodded. "But it was also out of her bowl."

Noel's eyes narrowed.

"Something here ain't right," Charlie growled.

Noel looked at the broken glass. "No, something isn't right."

Charlie left, and Dane went back to the bed. He stared over at Goldie as Noel looked around for some breakfast fixings. Finding none, he got on his cell phone and ordered breakfast to be brought to him and Dane.

"She's still alive," Noel said, hoping to cheer him.

"No thanks to me."

"Dane..." Noel patted his shoulder awkwardly. "I'm not sure what happened with Goldie, but if it is what you suspect and somehow you made a mistake, then you have to forgive yourself."

"How can I?" Dane rasped, closing his eyes tightly.

"Because you love her very much, and I'm sure that somehow...it must balance out."

"You don't think she's gonna make it."

Noel sat down beside Dane and touched his shoulder. "Why do you say that?"

"Cause you bought me another fish."

"Dane..." Noel didn't know what to say. "I just thought..."

"You can't replace friends like that, Noel!" Dane's fists knotted. "If you died, do you think I'd just go out and find another boyfriend?"

Noel bit his lip.

"You think because she's just a fish, she don't matter none, but I'm used to her. On the ceiling sometimes, I see red and gold reflected from her bowl in the sunshine. I could watch that for hours when I talk to her."

Noel climbed stiffly to his feet. He desperately wanted a shower and massage for his leg and back. He was getting pain messages from sitting in the same position all night. Instead, he put his hands on Dane's shoulders.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do. You are hurting so terribly and it...was almost unbearable." Noel shoved back his disheveled hair. "I can't watch you suffering and not want to do something, even if it's the wrong thing."

"If Goldie dies, I don't deserve another fish anyways, because I'm not a good friend."

Noel's jaw hardened. "Dane, this is not your fault, sweetheart. Do you understand me? It's not your fault, and you would take very good care of any goldfish. Um, that's why I bought him for you," he said, improvising.

"You did?" Dane asked. "You thought I could take care of him?"

"Of course I did. I never doubted you," Noel said, glad to be on firmer ground. He hadn't expected the reasoning behind his gift to be so clear to Dane. He'd been guilty of underestimating him.

"As long as you didn't mean him as a replacement for Goldie."

Noel swallowed, deciding it was best to avoid those waters. "He could be her boyfriend when she's better," he suggested.

Dane's eyes widened. "You think she was lonely, with just me?"

He looked so upset that Noel, despite his stiff leg, sat against the headboard and pulled Dane between his spread legs. "No, you are like...her daddy, but it's nice having someone, don't you think?"

Dane watched Goldie solemnly. He leaned his head back so it rested against Noel's slender, softly muscled chest. One big, rough hand curved around Noel's thigh. "Yeah, it's nice havin' someone."

Breakfast arrived from a restaurant Noel sometimes went to with his father. He ordered Dane to stay where he was and, remembering friendly, innocent, nude Dane opening his door, realized that if he hadn't told him to put on some pants, the man with the food would have opened his door to naked Dane. The thought of that made him grind his teeth a little.

It wasn't easy guarding his Dane.

His father called. Noel saw it was one of several calls. He didn't return them. What could he say? He rubbed his tired eyes. He'd barely slept. One day he'd been beginning a secret sexual relationship with Dane, and then he'd come here. He'd come here, and he'd stayed. What did that mean?

He couldn't speak with his father when he didn't yet understand why he was here, and why he had to stay here.

"Those cakes look like little girls' dresses." Dane was marveling at the French pastries as he opened the boxes of food.

"Those are for dessert."

"Oh." Dane looked crushed.

Noel shook his head ruefully. "And I'm an ass. Who cares if you are supposed to eat them last? Bring them over, and we'll have cake first, all right?"

Dane gave Noel a sunny smile. "I always have dessert first. Why would I want to be all full up with the other stuff when there's dessert?"

Noel smiled. He picked up a chocolate cake with purple flowers and lacy peach filigree. Dane's eyes widened. "It's almost too pretty to eat," he said.

"Open," Noel commanded.

Dane obeyed, and Noel broke the cake into bits and then fed him chocolate orange cream cake. Despite his fatigue and pain, he felt his penis swell as he watched Dane lick and suck his fingers, drawing out every bit of eating the pastry. "What flavor next, gorgeous?" He wanted to kiss those happy lips.

Dane greedily eyed the remaining cakes. "I can't make up my mind, Noel! You choose for me?"

Noel leaned his forehead against Dane's. "Okay, I can do that."

Chapter Ten

Puppy

Dane threw himself at the heavy bag. One jab, *bam!* Two cross punches, *bam! Bam!*

"Again, keep it up! Intensity! Kill that fucker!" Charlie yelled.

Bam! Bam!

"Watch your feet. Balance! Move them together!"

Cut, jab, punch, punch, *punch!*

"All right! Hold it! Hold it!" Charlie let go of the heavy bag he was holding steady for Dane. "Your footwork is a fuckin' disgrace! You're all over the place. You gotta move like a ballerina, not like fuckin' King Kong!"

"Yeah, but I bet King Kong, he could really nail this bastard, you know?" Dane joked. His hair was stuck to his head. He was dripping with sweat from the intense workout with the heavy bag. With one gloved hand, he rubbed where his rib was still tender.

"Are you okay?" Noel asked quietly.

"No worries. Charlie likes the old methods, you know? Roadwork, sparring, heavy bags, sit-ups, jump rope, speed bag."

"Yeah, well, no sparring till I'm happy with that rib, but I want you up at four a.m. tomorrow, and you better put two miles behind you, kid."

Dane spat into a pail by the bag and scrubbed his glowing face with a thin towel. "A-okay. I'll do my roadwork."

"You do that, kid." Charlie nodded, looking satisfied. "You're showing some real promise lately."

All around were the grunts of men working out with heavy bags or the small swinging bags. Some were jumping rope. One short black man with fresh bruises and a

bandage over his nose was doing sit-ups with his back hanging off the side of the ring in the center of Charlie's gym.

Noel put his hands in his pockets. He felt the eyes of the other men on him and Dane.

"Gladiators," he said.

"What's a gladiator?"

"They fought in ancient Rome, though boxing was invented in ancient Greece."

"Yeah?" Dane was taking his gloves off. He had wrapped his hands before he'd started his workout, and now Noel saw they were red and swollen with blood. "You know a lot about the sweet science, huh?"

Noel smiled. "Only from my research. These men are all very dedicated."

"Yeah, and they work hard too," Dane said. "C'mon, I'm goin' back for a steam. You want one maybe too?"

"Oh, no."

"It'll make you feel good, and we could maybe snuggle a little," Dane coaxed.

"No, thanks." Noel blushed, rubbing his leg and trying not to limp as he followed Dane to the back.

"Hey, Dane! That your boyfriend?"

Expecting this would get very like grade school, Noel closed his eyes.

Dane laughed and ruffled the hair of the slight man who had been doing the sit-ups. "I want very much for him to be my boyfriend. It would be a total honor."

The man wiped his face with a towel and then smiled at Noel. "I'm Leon." He stuck out his hand. "You're the only guy Dane's ever brought here."

Noel shook Leon's hand. "Oh. That's...oh."

Leon laughed. "It's fine, you bein' gay. I mean, I'm personally not. But this place is sorta like the army, you know. Don't ask, don't tell. 'Cept for Dane."

Dane smiled. "I like bein' gay."

Leon shook his head. "You big lunk," he said affectionately. "You need to go see *Brokeback Mountain* or somethin'. Get educated on how you are an oppressed minority."

"It doesn't have a happy ending," Dane said, resuming his journey to the locker room. "I don't like stuff without a happy ending."

Noel followed. "Why is that?" he asked quietly as Dane stripped out of his soaked clothing.

"'Cause real life is all..." Dane frowned and then rubbed a hand over his stomach, which rippled with slick muscles. "It's like these bruises on my body, you know? It's all about the pain and livin' with the pain. So when I see a movie, I like it to be happy. Real life ain't so happy for people like me, Noel."

"I'm sorry," Noel said.

"Yeah, me too, but I ain't cryin' about it, you know?" Dane braced his arms against his locker. His eyes were scrunched tightly closed. Sweat rolled down his cheeks.

"What is it? You look like you're in distress!" Noel touched one warm, wet shoulder.

"It's nothin'. Don't worry about it. Just...it'll pass."

"Dane!"

Dane's brown eyes snapped open. He leaned down and gave Noel a gentle kiss. "Pain is... It's sort of a fact of life for a boxer, Noel. Anyway, don't tell Charlie nothin', or he'll make me wait another week, and he says I'm lookin' sharp lately."

"Why do you fight, Dane?"

"'Cause it's all I'm good for," Dane said. "I'm like a heavy bag, see. Just good at takin' punches."

"I think you're more than that."

Dane smiled serenely. "I know what I am, Noel. I'm not educated like you are."

"So you think maybe I should bring Goldie home a gift or somethin'? You think she'd like that maybe, since she's a girl fish and all? I wanted to draw her fins, like a...likeness, I guess they call it? But my fingers are still too swollen."

"That might be a stereotype, that a girl fish likes gifts," Noel teased, taking one of Dane's battered hands in his. He glanced around and saw they were alone, so he raised it, put it against his cheek, and nuzzled it tenderly.

"Oh...so you don't think a gift is a good idea because my fish, she might be like a feminist or somethin'?"

Noel laughed. "I'm sure she is, but I don't really think a gift is a bad idea."

"How come you're lookin' at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're about to cry or somethin'. I make you sad, Noel?"

Noel shook his head. He cleared his throat. "No. You make me... There aren't words."

"You got lots of words, Noel!" Dane said.

"I don't have ones for how you make me feel."

Noel wanted to sneak into the shower and use it, but...all these healthy young men. He felt horribly self-conscious. Did they imagine him and Dane together?

"That was a good steam. All the bad went out, you know?"

"You're dripping on your clean clothing."

"Oh, yeah, thanks. Don't want to do that. Want to look sharp since I'm out with you."

Dane slick from his shower. His powerful body sculpted with rounded muscle... Noel glanced at the long length of Dane's sleeping penis and then looked away. "Caught you!" Dane smiled. "You think I'm a hunk, huh?" Noel smiled, blushing. "Let's get your goldfish a gift!"

* * * * *

The pet store was located on a grimy corner between Dane's apartment and Charlie's gym. Noel stepped over some newspaper stained with yellow clouds as he followed Dane inside. It smelled of warm vomit and cat urine.

"Hey! I need a gift for my goldfish!"

"Dane, Jesus fucking Christ, you have to yell whenever you come in here?" a short brunet man demanded. He had a perpetual frown and a stomach that swelled over his belt buckle. He gave Noel a sour glance. "Who's that?"

"That's my man, Noel! Noel, this is Rick, and he sold me Goldie."

"I...hello." Noel remembered Charlie talking about a pet-store owner...who wanted to trade Dane's favors for a puppy.

"That fish still alive?" Rick was restocking shelves. "I got lots more where it came from, you know, if you ever want another color."

Dane frowned. "I like Goldie's colors just fine."

"I got some new ones with really long fins. Could cut you a deal. See?"

Dane bent close and looked into a foggy green aquarium. Noel didn't miss how Rick eyed his ass as he did so. Noel sidled up next to Dane.

"Pretty, but I got Goldie, thanks."

"Fuck, just flush her down the john and try another color. You can't want the same fish year after year."

Dane's eyes widened. "I couldn't do that, Rick! Goldie's alive."

"She's just a fish."

"She's my friend."

"You eat fish, right? They are barely alive, you big prick."

"Don't call him that!" Noel growled.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Noel!" Dane held Noel back. Rick tried to go for him, but Dane blocked his passage. "Rick, don't fight."

"What do you want, if you don't want a new fish then?" Rick demanded.

"I was thinking...maybe some new sand for Goldie's tank. I like this hot pink color...and the blue is nice too."

"You don't mix colors, moron. It's blue or pink, and the pink is for little girls."

"But I like it. I don't see why I can't have pink."

Rick shook his head in disgust. "Yeah, everyone knows you like pink, Dane. All right. And I got another temple in."

He handed a gaudy ancient Greek temple to Dane, who studied it carefully. It was fluorescent orange. "She could probably swim through it. She might like that."

"Whatever."

As they walked to the till, a puppy in a tiny cage barked at their feet. Rick kicked the cage so it jumped, making the puppy fall over and whimper.

"Oh, Rick..." Dane got down on his hands and knees, looming over the tiny cage. "You scared the little guy."

"Can't sell the fucker."

The puppy was black, but his fur was matted. His eyes were crusted, and his cage was filthy. His little club tail wagged once for Dane, revealing his rear end, which was covered in dried puppy shit.

"I wish I could buy you," Dane said sadly. "I'd give you a really good shower."

"C'mon, I want to close up," Rick urged.

Noel saw Dane put one big finger in the cage. The frightened puppy sniffed and then licked it.

"I'll buy him," Noel surprised himself by saying.

Dane blinked up at Noel. "You want a puppy, Noel?"

"I want him for you, Dane."

"That dog is a runt! Gonna send him back to the puppy mill. You sure you want him?"

Noel nodded firmly, taking out his gold card. "And Dane will pick out some toys...and things for him. Oh, and puppy shampoo."

Halfway home with the puppy lying asleep over Dane's muscled shoulder, he paused. "You didn't buy the puppy because you think Goldie's gonna die, did you, Noel?"

Noel shook his head, having learned his lesson. "I bought the puppy because I couldn't bear to leave him there. And...I knew you'd take good care of him."

Dane smiled. "I know he don't smell too good, but I promise I'll deal with that as soon as I get him home. Do you want me to take the bag with Goldie's things?"

"No, I've got it."

At the apartment, Dane went straight to the tank, looking for Goldie. She was resting near the bottom, but her fins were shimmering as they moved. "I think she might be a little better maybe!"

Dane put the puppy down on the floor and watched the little body waddle uncertainly over cracked linoleum.

Closing his eyes, Noel pressed his face against the back of Dane's neck. Thankful. "I think you're right. I think she'll be just fine."

Dane started laughing. "She won't die and leave me, Noel!"

"She's a very sensible fish." Noel nuzzled Dane. "Why would she ever want to leave you?"

Chapter Eleven

Bonding

"You saved Goldie!" Dane rested his forehead against Noel's.

Noel whispered, "I couldn't even imagine someone like you a short time ago."

"That's good, right?" Noel kissed the brimming moisture from Dane's eyes, and Dane shivered in response. "Oh, man, that feels so good. Like...I'm someone to you, you know?"

"You have no idea who you are to me. No idea." Noel herded Dane toward his bed. Newspaper crackled under Dane's hands as he fell back with his legs open, looking up at Noel with big doe eyes.

"What's with the newspaper on the bed?" Noel straddled Dane.

"Hey, hey! You're shaking, Noel. How come?" Dane frowned.

Noel tensed. Trust Dane to sense his upset. He couldn't hide his feelings from Dane. For some reason, he could hide from his father, or from his father's friends, but with Dane, his feelings might as well be painted in neon.

"I was sure your goldfish would die and somehow...it felt like it was my fault. I guess we were both feeling responsible for some reason. And I just didn't know how to help you not hurt." Noel kissed Dane's neck. Soft. "I want to see you. I want to touch your body."

"Okay." Dane glowed. "You like my body, don't you?"

"Yes!"

Dane pulled his shirt off and then opened his pants. Noel ran a thumb over the plum head of his tall cock. "If I'm your boyfriend, I get to play with it whenever I want."

Dane beamed. "Okay." He shoved his pants off and spread his legs, lifting his hips and pushing his erection into Noel's care. "This is why it's so great that I'm gay."

"Dane..." Noel pushed him on his back, and newspaper crackled again. "I want to hear about why you have two-year-old newspaper on your bed."

"Oh, it's goin' on two years now?" Dane gasped as Noel began to pump him. "Um, I brought someone here two years ago, and I thought he'd stay the night, you know? But he bent over my kitchen table so I could... And after, he just left. Didn't stay or nothin' for a little cuddling, like I hoped. Anyways, my bed felt too big, you know? So I put the newspaper on it, and every time I move, the paper makes noise so I know I'm not alone. It means there are people out there. I'm not alone even if I sleep alone, you know? And also when I met you...well, I drew your eyes on the paper, so it was just like you was here with me, in my bed."

"You draw?" Noel took in the many likenesses of his eyes. "Those are very good, Dane!"

Dane grinned at the praise. "When my hands aren't all busted up."

"I want to sleep in your bed with you," Noel said, combing back Dane's hair.

"Well, it ain't that big, I guess, and the mattress kind of sags, but if you want, you can sleep here. I'd...very much like you to sleep here with me, you know? If it's what you'd like."

"I wish I could." Noel rubbed his forehead. "I wish I could be with you...all the time. My father! God, what must he be thinking? I haven't called him back. I have no idea how he'd feel if he knew I was seeing...someone."

"Like a male someone?"

"I've never discussed homosexuality with my father."

Dane stroked Noel's cheek, trying to calm him a little. His Noel was sort of wound up all the time. Dane knew he was good at calming down someone like that. Sort of like...he was a laxative or something, maybe. He fixed people who were too uptight.

"I'll call him in a moment. Just let me have some time with you. Just let me touch you," Noel pleaded.

Dane knew he wasn't speaking to him, Dane, but to himself, and to his father. He felt sad, since he knew that he wasn't first in Noel's life, and knew he couldn't be.

"Noel, can I touch you too, please?" he asked.

Noel started. "Dane..."

"What's the matter? You don't like anyone seeing your bum leg, huh. But you haven't let me touch your penis, and I would very much like to do that for you, you know? Give you a handjob, I mean," Dane said. He kissed Noel's chin, asking him for permission. "Unless, you know, your penis is deformed or something, and then I can turn out the lights before I do that."

Noel laughed. "It's not deformed. I'm very...ordinary. Not like you."

"No, you aren't." Dane opened Noel's trousers so that Noel's hungry fullness spilled out for the first time. Pushing down Noel's silk boxers so Noel's penis was exposed from root to tip, Dane licked his lips. "I love to play with these. Please, can I play with you? Please?"

Noel laughed again. "You make sex...not so serious."

Noel fell closer, hanging over Dane so their penises touched. "Oh, my God!" he whispered.

Dane milked them both, rubbing them together gently, and then he couldn't be so gentle. Noel was gasping, clawing at Dane's shoulders, shuddering as penis rubbed against penis and Dane's big hand pulled them both off.

"Look at us! I never thought something like that would be so..." Noel's face was taut, like skin over a drum.

"Noel, can I come now?"

"Yes, gorgeous." Noel kissed him, chest heaving. "Come with me, Dane."

Dane's muscled body arched, rising and falling like he was floating over waves in the ocean. Crying out with him, Noel experienced for the first time their mingled come, warm on the skin of their cocks, warm on the skin of their bellies.

"We belong to each other now," Noel whispered, shaky from what they'd shared. He didn't know if it was good or bad. Didn't know if he was scared or sad or happy. He felt all that, as well as things he couldn't name.

"Oh. Dane."

Dane looked down and saw the puppy had piddled and shit all over the floor while he and Noel played on the bed together.

"I'll give him his bath."

"I'll wipe up."

"You don't have to do that."

"Well, you do have some handy newspaper I can use, fortunately." Noel gathered up the newspaper that Dane had on his bed, though he carefully set aside anything that Dane had scribbled over. "You don't need it anymore to remind you that you're not alone. Now you have me."

The puppy cried when they bathed him together, so that Dane teared up. They found sores all over his little body. They had to bathe him twice because he was so filthy, and he had a bout of diarrhea the first time.

"Come on, let's get him to a vet," said Noel decisively.

"He's not going to die?"

"No, he's just... I think he was abused a little." Noel looked at sad Dane holding sad puppy and pulled them both into his arms. "But now he's got us."

"He's sick at both ends. I brought you samples." Noel handed the vet, a middle-aged woman, two plastic baggies he'd gathered of the puppy's leavings. "The, uh, the urine might be a little odd. Dane gave him juice by accident."

"He won't die from the juice, will he?" Dane asked. He was as squirmy as the puppy he was holding on the metal examination table.

"No. So, what's his name?" She was looking into the puppy's ears. Next, she examined the sores on his skin.

"I don't know," Dane finally said. "It takes me a long time to think of a name. When I named my fish Goldie, I thought of the name right away, but the boys at the gym thought it was a dumb name, so I tried all kinds of other names for a while. But she liked Goldie, so we went back to that one. I kind of thought...Sparrow, on account of his small bones," Dane finished shyly.

"I like Sparrow," Noel said.

Dane, reassured, smiled at Noel.

"Hmmm, looks like his fur being unwashed and exposure to some kind of damp environment led to a skin infection," the vet noted.

"Can you fix it, doc?" Dane asked anxiously.

"Yes. You'll have to wash him with a special shampoo, and blow-dry his fur very carefully. Also, if he gets wet outside, you'll have to dry his skin. I'll put him on some prescriptions for the other things. And you are planning on fixing him, right? That's the responsible thing to do."

Dane frowned. "Um, yeah. Aren't we fixing him now?"

Dane was a little pale when it was explained what the vet meant, but after hearing about stray puppies being abandoned, he didn't need any more convincing. His puppy would be fixed when he was old enough! The little dog also received a shot with a microchip to the back of his neck. The needle was so big that the puppy yelped, and both the vet and Noel had to calm Dane down afterward.

* * * * *

They returned to Dane's apartment, exhausted. Noel's leg was giving off shooting pains, and he knew he had to go home. Face his father. Take care of himself.

Dane crawled onto his bed and blinked up at Noel miserably. "You'll come back soon?"

Noel leaned down and kissed him. "I'll tidy up a bit around here first."

"Oh, I can do that."

"No, stay with the puppy. I want to do something for you before I have to leave."

Dane lay back, watching with sad, dark eyes as Noel washed the dishes and stored away the food from that morning.

At last, Noel had cleaned Dane's apartment. And he knew he had only done it because he really wanted to stay.

He didn't want to leave Dane.

The cheap, puppy-stinky, tiny apartment felt more home to him than his cool, spacious rooms.

When he let himself out the door, he looked back and saw that Dane had fallen asleep on his bed with Sparrow sleeping on top of Dane's big chest. His throat tightened, and he felt unbearably lonely. He wanted to be on Dane's bed. Sleeping. Wrapped around the same warm body as was the puppy.

"See you soon," Noel whispered, before he gently closed the door on two days with his Dane.

Chapter Twelve

Loss

"Haw-huh! Haw-huh! Haw-huh!"

"Hey, dude. You okay, man?"

Dane had both hands braced against the metal gate surrounding the city library.

"S-sure, 'm okay..."

"Man, you don't look too good. You got asthma or somethin'?"

"...No..." Haw-huh! "Running. I was just...running."

"Well, no offense, but I think you might want to take it easy. You look like you're in pain!"

Dane straightened, shaking his calves so they didn't cramp. He had one hand over his sore rib. He scrubbed away the sweat on his face with the other. "I'm okay, but thanks. You're a very sensational person, anyone ever tell you that?"

On his way upstairs to his apartment, Dane stumbled a little. He slumped against the hallway, closing his eyes.

"Dane? That you, boy?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Trent. It's me. Hope I didn't wake you up any, it bein' so early."

"I got a call for you from that university where you work. They want you should call them back."

"Oh, thank you! I'll go out to the pay phone."

"Naw, come inside, and I'll make you some of my milky tea. You like my milky tea, don't you?"

"Um...can you remember to put lots of sugar in it, Mr. Trent?" Dane went into his neighbor's apartment, which was the same footprint as his own. Mr. Trent was eighty-five years old, and he was afraid of people ever since his place had been robbed and some kids had beaten him up—except for Dane. Dane had found him and called the cops, and then he'd had a word with the kids. He'd got back the silver frame with Mr. Trent's wife's picture, and he'd warned the kids that if they ever hassled Mr. Trent again, well, Dane would lose his temper, and he'd be very sorry about that, but that's how it was.

The elderly man nodded and put a cold hand on Dane's big fist as Dane lifted the phone. His blue-veiny hand had a real grip. "You need to be careful you don't hurt yourself, young Dane."

"No worries." Dane gave him a sunny smile.

"Don't kid a kidder, boy. You're hurtin', and I don't like to see it. You need to watch those ribs. Why are you pushing yourself so hard?"

Dane sighed. "I met someone. I want that he should respect me, you know? And I don't got too much goin' for me, 'cept my body. I want him to see me fight because..." Dane drifted off, picturing it. "Then he'd know I'm a man. He'd know I'm worthy of bein' his boyfriend. I need to fight for that, I know it. Nothin' in my life has come easy, but I'm going to be his. I want to be his so bad, Mr. Trent." The last was said in a mournful tone.

The older man sat down. "You don't need to get beat up for someone to care about you, Dane, and I'm surprised I have to tell you that." He shook his head. "Is this the young, slender boy with the cane?"

Dane nodded. "He's gone now. He went back to his life and...I'm not part of it."

"I'll make you some tea now. It won't help your heartbreak, but it will give you a little gas in your engine."

"Suspended? But I don't understand, Ms. Flemming. I only ever missed two days, and I done my job." Dane gripped the receiver. He scrubbed a hand over his hair, which was stiff with sweat. "So I need to get an advocate? I dunno, I'm...I'm not real good with things like this. I don't get it. I did my job, I swear! Please don't fire me, Ms. Flemming! Okay, yeah...I'll come down and see you tomorrow. Ms. Flemming? Can I please go to work after I see you? I need to do my job... Oh. No, I'm sorry... I guess I didn't figure it right or somethin'. I don't mean to make things hard for you, I just...I really need the work. Hello? Hello?"

Dane put down the phone. "Guess it was a bad connection or somethin'," he told Mr. Trent.

He swayed, and Mr. Trent caught him and steered him to his lumpy old couch. He rubbed Dane's back as Dane sat there, head in his hands, trembling.

How could he be a man to Noel, or take care of Sparrow and Goldie, if he didn't have a job?

* * * * *

"Where were you?" Arthur's voice was dripping ice. "I can't believe how inconsiderate you were! You didn't even return my calls!"

Noel flushed, his eyes focused on the Persian carpet in his father's big study. "I'm very sorry, Father. I...I was helping out a friend."

"Friend? What kind of friend would take you from your father for two days?"

Noel's eyes flashed up briefly; his jaw was rigid. "He didn't take me from you. I just needed to help him out."

"He?" Arthur stood up and went over to his liquor cabinet. He banged out a drink while glaring at Noel, so Noel would know who was responsible for Arthur having a drink so early in the day. "Do I know him?"

Noel chewed his lip.

"Well, I think I deserve some explanation!"

"Yes, you've...met him."

"At a faculty function?"

"No."

"At one of my business luncheons?"

"No."

"Oh, perhaps it was at the yacht club? No?"

Noel shook his head, increasingly miserable. He knew he should be a man about this. He was old enough to see whom he wanted! But his father could always make him feel this way, as if his desires were insignificant.

He looked down at his fingers. Fingers that had confidently touched Dane. Controlled him. Comforted him. Taken care of him. Fed him cake. Let him come.

His fingers were empty now...

He didn't feel like the lover of a beautiful, glowing man who rubbed against him needily, whose dark brown eyes pleaded for Noel's attention.

He felt invisible again.

"He's a...janitor," Noel finished, knowing his father would force him to say it sooner or later. Needing it to be over. "He works at the school. Someone broke into his apartment and hurt his...pet, so he called me."

"Hmpph. A janitor. Is that what you want to be when you grow up, Noel?"

"No, of course not, but he's a working man. He's not rich, but he works."

"He's a servant. How can he be your friend? I thought I knew all your friends!"

Noel felt himself shrinking deeper into his protective shell.

"I seem to remember him. Wasn't he a big block of man? On the stupid side?"

"He's not!" Noel's hands fisted. "He hasn't had much formal education, but —"

"Noel, your physiotherapist is waiting. You have to go work with her and then do some laps in the pool. You know very well what this kind of deviation from your healthy routine could mean. You could suffer from excruciating leg cramps, just from sleeping on a bed not your own."

Noel flinched at the word *deviation* from his father's lips, but he knew he couldn't know...he'd never guess what his son had been doing and feeling.

"I'd like your word that you won't see this friend anymore, please."

The moment strung out between them. Always before Noel had said yes and gone back to his room and brooded, and his father had given him some extravagant gift to reward him for his compliance...and, after a while, Noel didn't ache as much for whatever it was he'd thought he wanted.

"No," Noel whispered.

"What?" The drink slammed down and Noel flinched...and hated himself for doing that. "Noel!"

Noel turned away.

"Noel, goddamn you, don't you walk away from me! Don't you ever walk away from me, or I'll make you regret it!"

Noel made it to the conservatory before the stress of confronting his father and the nights away from his regular exercise caught up with him.

He collapsed, his fist in his mouth to keep from screaming. The pain was so bad. The muscles in his abused leg tightened from his groin to his ankle, punishing him for his forbidden moments of freedom.

* * * * *

"This man. He'll do," Arthur said. He stabbed a finger toward a computer image of a professional boxer. "He should take care of the homo who's attached himself to my Noel."

"Dane's not a pro. I'm not sure we can arrange for him to fight Gerrard."

"It says here that Gerrard has been suspended for a charge of domestic violence toward his wife, so any fight could act as a comeback for him. If not for his wife ratting him out, he'd probably have had a chance at the title; he's very effective in the ring."

"Well, one guy who fought him never really recovered from the brain damage, that's sure. Are you certain about this, sir? It seems very extreme over some...lark on your son's part."

"I can't bear to think about my son—my son!—underneath that big brute. Noel's soft; he doesn't understand that the homo is just a toy. He actually defended his simpleton to me! Called him a friend! He's not fit to be in the same room as my son." Arthur rubbed his forehead with trembling fingers. "I once walked miles to save my

son! I was suffering from a concussion myself. I shouldn't have been able to do it, but I did what it took to take care of Noel, and now I'll do what it takes to remove this trash from his life. I don't care if the homo leaves the ring a vegetable; just find a way to arrange it!

Chapter Thirteen

Missing You

"Dane!"

"Yo, Charlie?" Dane went to his door and called, "It's unlocked, on account I'm home."

Charlie made a face as he entered Dane's apartment. "Jesus's nightgown, boy! It smells like shit in here!"

"Oh, that's Sparrow. Sparrow goes a lot, and I haven't taken the trash out yet. Gotta buy some more newspaper too. He goes through it quick."

Charlie saw the puppy hanging from one of Dane's big hands, nestled against his hip. "Dane, you didn't let Rick..."

"No! I swear! Noel bought him for me."

"Well, as long as you didn't trade yourself for, uh—"

"Naw, I'd lie down for Noel anytime. He doesn't need a puppy to get me to spread for him."

Charlie coughed. "That's...nice, Dane, but I really didn't need to know that."

"Oh. I guess that's sort of too much information, right?"

"Well, especially you bein' gay, boy. Not that I didn't know you were the one who would, er... Well, never mind about that! Just keep it to yourself."

"That I would lie down for Noel, you mean?" Dane frowned. "I'm not ashamed of that, Charlie. I'd be proud that Noel would want me enough for me to spread my legs for him. Not that he has. Yet. But I'm hopeful about it. I really want to spread for him soon."

"Gah!" Charlie held his head, groaning as if he were in pain.

"Oh," Dane said. "This is like...I'm tellin' you stuff you don't want to know, right?"

"Too much information, boy, but anyway, as a boxer, it would be better if people assumed you, uh, were the spreader, rather than the spreadee. Are we clear?"

Dane frowned. "Okay, I guess so. I'm not sure why it matters so much. I feel like a man when Noel touches me."

Charlie shook his head. "Boxers are sort of retro, boy. You know that."

"Yeah." Dane smiled. "So how come you came to see me?"

"I got a call about setting up your next fight...but before we get into that, are you all right? You looked like you'd been cryin'. Noel didn't hurt you none, did he?" Charlie looked fierce, reminding Dane how he'd been a fighter all his life.

"I might have lost my job. I find out tomorrow. I got to speak to someone about it."

"You lost the job I helped you find? How come?" Charlie rubbed his shock of white hair with dark fingers, battered from years in the ring before he'd opened his own joint.

"I don't know. Maybe they found out I didn't do so good at school myself? And now they'll know I'm really dumb 'cause I got to go talk to someone."

"I told you before, you don't need no education to work at the university. And you did a good job there for years, didn't you? Anyway, you want I should come with you, Dane?" Charlie's voice was gentle.

"Would you, Charlie? That would be sensational! I'm not so good with this sort of thing. I don't understand why they don't like me anymore."

"I'm sure it's not personal, son."

"How can it not be personal? They want to take my job away from me. That's very personal, Charlie."

Charlie was at a loss to know what to say, but there was nothing to be done until he found out the details the next day. And...Dane was right. A man's job was important. He'd taught Dane to take pride in his work, same as he did in the ring. It was personal, taking a man's work away from him. He sighed, deciding to turn his attention to Dane's healing body. That he could do something about.

"I don't like the look of those bruises."

Charlie moved behind Dane and held his ribs as he breathed in and out.

"Are you in pain?"

"A little."

"Dane."

"I can fight, Charlie. I promise!"

"Dane, it's not good for you to fight if you aren't at full speed. You are pushing yourself right now, maybe 'cause you think your new boyfriend will be impressed? Anyways, I'm not accepting this fight for you."

"How come?" Dane sat on his sagging bed.

"It's not that I don't think you got heart, kid. I know you do. And you train real hard and you keep your head in the ring mostly. But this boy who wants to fight you, he's one of the top fighters in the country. I'm not sure why he wants you."

"Who is he, Charlie?"

"Gerrard Narone."

"He's a real contender," Dane said in wonder.

"He's a fucking killing machine! I don't like it."

"But if he wants to fight with me, I should do it, shouldn't I? I mean, since he's nice enough he wants to do that."

"Dane—" Charlie sat down next to his fighter. "I take good care of you, don't I?"

"Sure, Charlie!"

"Okay then, so when I tell you I don't want you to meet this fella in the ring ever, then you know I'm tryin' to take care of you."

"I'm not afraid, Charlie."

"Well, I am, Dane. I am. Okay?"

Dane shrugged. "Okay. I always do like you say."

Charlie ruffled Dane's hair. "I'll drive you to the university tomorrow, and we'll work somethin' out. Don't you worry about it none."

"It's just that...I have Sparrow and Goldie and Blackie to take care of now. I can do without, but I have to make sure I take care of them. I'm their daddy. I need a fight soon to help pay for their food."

"Who the hell's Blackie?" Charlie looked around.

"Goldie's boy fish friend. He's the black-colored fish. Noel bought him for me."

"And you called him Blackie?" Charlie laughed. "Don't you worry. If you run short of cash, I'll sport you some."

"I can't take your money, Charlie," Dane said. "If I don't take care of myself and my family, then what kind of man am I?"

"Dane?" a man with ash-colored hair and a neatly trimmed beard called as Dane and Charlie headed toward SUB, the students' union building on campus.

"Hey! You're Noel's dad! I'm so happy to meet you again, sir!"

Charlie gave the approaching older man a sharp glance, sizing him up.

"Yes, well, I'd like to speak to you."

"That would be sensational!" Dane's face lit up. "I really, really like your son. He's very special, you know? I bet you are proud of him."

The hard face softened a little. "Yes, Noel is...exceptional. May I have a minute with Dane?" He raised an eyebrow at Charlie.

Charlie looked doubtful. "You want I should leave you alone with him?"

"Sure, Charlie. I'll catch up with you inside at the coffee shop."

"Yeah, I know where. See you in there, kid." Charlie looked back over his shoulder but then shook his head, leaving Dane with Arthur.

"He's my trainer. He came with me today to help me out on account I'm maybe being fired."

"Fired? Because you've been found incompetent?"

"I don't know. They don't like me anymore, I guess. Or someone told them I didn't do so good in school." Dane looked depressed.

"Well, a man like you...you are a laborer, aren't you?"

"Uh, well, I work with my body."

"I'm here about my son."

"Is Noel all right?" Dane's eyes filled with sudden worry.

"He's had a setback with his leg, but he'll be fine after some bed rest."

"Oh. Can I go to your house and see him? Please?"

"No, I don't think that would be a good thing."

"I wouldn't upset him none. I'd be really quiet."

"It's because of you that he's in pain. I wanted you to understand that."

Dane stumbled over to one of the benches.

Arthur watched remotely.

"I...hurt Noel?"

"He's disabled. He has special needs, and being with you for such a prolonged period of time wasn't good for his health. Also, he can't engage in any kind of activity which...excites him."

"But I didn't excite him, honest! Oh... Uh."

"Are you having a sexual relationship with my son?" Arthur's eyes narrowed. He looked like he wanted a piece of Dane.

Dane blushed. "It's not right I talk about this with you. Without Noel's okay, I mean."

"I'm his father! I want to know if you're fucking my son, you perverted...!"

Dane stood. His eyes stung, since it hurt so much that Noel's dad hated him. He'd wanted to make a good impression. "I can't talk about this with you. I'm sorry."

"Don't you turn your back on me, you fucking queer! I have a right to know!"

"It's private. I'm sorry, sir, but I can't talk about your son none without him bein' around. It ain't right."

"You're nothing to him! Do you hear me? You're just some trash he picked up!"

Dane scrubbed his eyes as he hit the glass doors into SUB. Then he headed over to the men's. He didn't want Charlie seeing him like this. His hands shook as he poured cold water on them. He looked in the mirror. Saw dark eyes and bruises. Looked away.

"Who are you kiddin'? Noel don't care for you none, and he never will. You never had a shot."

* * * * *

"Sexual harassment?" Dane blinked.

"Do you understand this complaint? It means that you were overbearing or suggestive to one of our young, impressionable students." Ms. Flemming's voice was icy. She was sitting behind her desk, facing Dane and Charlie. She had dark hair that fell in soft waves around her face. Really nice hair, Dane thought.

"Dane sexually harassed someone? That's not right!" Charlie barked. "He'd never do that. Never."

"Charlie?" Dane looked at his friend. "What? What did I do wrong?"

"Nothin'. Don't you worry about this, kid. This is bullshit."

Dane's eyes widened at Charlie's language in front of a lady.

"Mr. Burns, you are not helping your friend's case."

"This case is bullshit! He'd never hurt anybody. Besides, he's got a boyfriend already."

"Having a boyfriend doesn't mean he isn't preying on innocent students."

"Who filed the fucking complaint?"

"Mr. Burns! I must ask you to watch your language!"

"All right, I'm sorry. Dane's like a son to me. Just tell me who filed the complaint."

"That's confidential."

"I can't believe anyone would have a problem with this boy. He's gentle."

"He's a boxer, I understand."

Charlie frowned. "He's an athlete, not a brawler, Ms. Flemming."

She sighed. "Yes, I'm sorry, you are correct. Well, Mr. Burns, the complaint comes from a parent. Apparently Dane made advances to his son."

"I didn't make no advances on no one. I got a boy, Ms. Flemming."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did you meet this boy on campus?"

Dane looked at Charlie, afraid. He wasn't sure what he should say. Charlie nodded to him, so he took a deep breath.

“Noel’s someone I seen in the library, and I fell for him. But I never harassed him none. He prefers to do all the harassing in our relationship.”

Chapter Fourteen

Penetration

"Phone call, Dane!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Trent. I didn't mean for you to be bothered."

"It's that boy you're sweet on."

"Noel?"

Dane followed the elderly man back to his apartment and grabbed the receiver with a shaking hand. His throat tightened, and he closed his eyes. "Noel, is that you?"

"Dane, I've been thinking about you all day."

"Me too."

"First, is Goldie all right?"

"Yeah. She's swimmin' around more, and the boy fish is swell too. I bought him some colored marbles and a little island for his tank."

"What color?"

"Green. Green marbles."

Soft, raw. "God, I miss you, gorgeous."

"Noel, I made you sick!" Dane choked. He was getting emotional, so he turned his back on Mr. Trent.

"Sick? Where did you get that idea?"

"Oh...um, 'cause you never called. I figured maybe...maybe you did too much and your leg got hurt."

"It's not your fault." Noel's voice was caressing.

Dane wrapped his arms around himself and wished they were Noel's arms. "It is. I shouldn't have excited you!"

"I loved that you excited me! I want you to do that again. Soon."

"I miss you, Noel. I feel like one big ache. Like nothin' has any color. I hurt 'cause you're not around."

"Baby, I'll send a car over so you can come see me tonight. I bought you something. Would you like to see it?"

"I don't think that's maybe a good idea. What about your father?"

* * * * *

Dane gave the long black car a nervous look as it pulled up in front of his apartment building.

A man got out of the car and looked Dane over appraisingly. Dane was glad he'd showered and was wearing his favorite T-shirt, which didn't have puppy pee all over it.

"You are Dane? Mr. Noel sent the car for you."

Dane swallowed and nodded. He almost opened the passenger door, but the driver raised a brow, so he got in back and slid in, feeling like he was entering a different world. The vehicle had a new-car smell, and there was room even for Dane's long legs. He ran a hand over the upholstery. "Wow!" he said. "This is...nice, you know? You really feel like someone sittin' back here."

The driver smiled at him in the mirror. "Microfiber. More practical than suede, but it feels like it, doesn't it? I suggested it when the car was purchased. Help yourself to a glass of champagne. Mr. Noel wanted you to be comfortable."

Dane saw there was a bottle chilling on ice in a little tray with a single glass. There was a piece of paper attached. It was Noel's writing, he recognized. *Have a glass, but not too much. It will relax you and prepare you for my gift.*

Dane felt himself harden. He wiped his hands on his jeans, a little embarrassed, but he felt like the car, and the way he was being picked up...there was something sort of sexy about it. He was being brought to Noel. He couldn't exactly figure why that was sexy, but it felt that way.

"I'm supposed to drink some," Dane told the driver, almost apologetically. "But I don't know how to open the bottle."

"Hand it to me, Dane." The man's voice was gentle. He had silver hair and kind brown eyes. He looked like he'd seen every kind of thing there was to see and it had made him sad.

Dane liked him. He handed him the bottle.

"Mr. Noel is very...attached to you."

Dane gave a hopeful smile, flinching as the bottle was uncorked. He always found it scary when someone opened a bottle like that. "I love him," he said simply. "I ain't told him that, on account if you tell someone you love them, then they feel like they have to love you back, you know? But I love Noel."

The bottle was handed back to Dane. "That's good. Mr. Noel needs to be loved. He wants to be a better person, Dane."

"Oh, he's perfect!"

"No, he's not. His father has...not been a good influence, I fear." The driver pulled out into traffic. "But Mr. Noel wants to be a good person. His mother was a good woman."

"Is she dead?"

"Yes. She died in the car accident in which Mr. Noel was hurt."

"I'm very sorry. I would have liked to have met Noel's mother." Dane took a sip. Wrinkled his nose.

"You don't like the champagne?"

"I was just thinkin' that if I fed this to my puppy, he wouldn't want to drink it either," Dane said.

"Thank you!" Dane went around the car and shook hands with the driver, startling him for some reason. "You drive real good. You must be proud to drive such a nice car!"

The older man smiled, his eyes lighting up. "I'm Gilbert. And I am proud. Go inside the house now, Dane. Up the stairs, and you'll find Mr. Noel's room. He left the light on so you'd find it easily."

"He said his father wasn't home," Dane said, reluctant to enter the huge, intimidating house. It looked sort of Spanish to him.

"Yes, he's away on business for the weekend."

"You won't tell him I was here?" Dane bit his lip. "I hate to ask or nothin', since I know it ain't right, but I'm worried for Noel. I only came here tonight to make sure he's okay."

"I won't tell. Go see Mr. Noel now."

Dane gave an apprehensive look at the looming house.

"It's just a house, with toilets and a kitchen like any other. And the people who live in it aren't really any different from where you live."

"I know that. I just feel...like I'm not good enough now I see this house."

* * * * *

"He's not good enough for my son," Arthur said. He poured himself a drink and then offered one to his guest for the evening, Gerrard Narone.

"Your son is a fag?"

"No! Noel's not a fag. He's just very...impressionable. I have to protect him from this man, who I don't think is very smart. In fact, I've wondered if Dane might be brain damaged. It's a risk in your profession."

Gerrard shrugged, and Arthur appraised him—his heavily muscled body, the thick forehead, the thin lips, hinting at his half-black, half-Hispanic heritage. He thought him a mongrel, no better really than Dane, except that he was ready to do Arthur's bidding, would probably take pleasure in it.

"What are those marks on your fist?"

"I was part of a gang for a while. So you're offering me a lot of money to take care of this fag for you, but his manager turned down the fight."

"Yes, Charlie something... I have an idea of how we might deal with him."

"Charlie Burns was a real contender in his day. He's a tough man. He ain't gonna change his mind."

"What if he's not in the picture anymore?" Arthur sat down and pulled his linen slacks taut, smoothing them.

"What do you mean? He manages this Dane fella."

"Charlie Burns has a gym in a bad neighborhood."

Narone paused, thinking. He sipped his whiskey. "Uh-huh."

* * * * *

Dane crept up the stairs, afraid to make too much noise. He knew that Noel's father would be very angry he was here, but he had to know how Noel was. He had to know if it was true what Noel's father had said. If he made Noel feel bad, he'd have to dump Noel. He didn't want to do that. He wasn't sure if he could go on breathing if he thought he wouldn't be kissed by Noel again...but he had to do what was right for Noel.

If he loved Noel, he had to be a man about it.

"Dane?" The voice was soft, purring, and when Dane entered the huge white bedroom, he saw Noel, looking like a king or something, lazing on silk pillows.

"You look like a happy, pale cat," Dane said, taking in Noel's ruffled curls and heavy-lidded blue eyes.

"A lonely one." Noel sat up. "Gorgeous, I missed you!"

"Noel, I have to know if I made you sick. I don't want to excite you none till I know if it's bad for you."

"What?" Noel's mouth tightened. He had dark circles around his eyes, as if he hadn't been sleeping.

As Dane came closer, he saw there were many pill bottles on Noel's bedside table, as well as water and fresh fruit.

Feeling shy, he stood in front of the fancy bed. Feeling how he didn't belong.

Noel's room smelled of fresh roses.

Dane's room smelled like fresh puppy shit.

"Did you wear your collar like I asked?"

"You didn't so much ask as told me," Dane said.

"Did you?" Noel looked a bit grumpy, but Dane guessed sick people felt that way. He watched Noel reach for some water. His hand was shaking.

"Yeah."

"Strip for me. I want to see you wearing your kitty collar, and only your kitty collar."

Dane flushed, feeling even more timid. What was he to Noel? Did Noel see him as trash, like his father said?

Eyes down, and feeling all churned up inside, Dane closed Noel's door. Then he hesitated. "If I get undressed, will you try not to get excited?"

"What?"

"Will that make you sick? Because if you get sick from...from feelin' the things a man does, then I'll stop."

Noel shook his head. "Where do you get these ideas, Dane? I'm amazed at what goes on in your head!"

Dane's mouth formed a stubborn line Noel had never before seen. "I'm not flashing my body for you unless you tell me whether I made you sick!"

Noel groaned, sitting up. He lifted his bad leg, which was under his bedcovers. "You could never make me sick. It's not your fault I'm sick. My father wants me to stay safe, like a child, but being with you...it was worth the discomfort."

Dane hovered, feeling miserable.

"What is it, gorgeous?" Noel asked gently, the purr back in his voice as if he knew he had to lure stubborn Dane away from the door.

"Nothin'."

Noel held his hand out, blue eyes blazing the way they did when he touched Dane's naked body. "Come here."

Eyes on the floor, Dane went. When he sat on the edge of Noel's bed, he exploded. "What do you mean 'what goes on in my head'? What am I to you? Am I trash to you, Noel?"

Noel's hand dropped, and suddenly he looked pissed. He snared Dane's chin, raising it so that soft brown velvet had to meet hot blue. "Trash? Have I ever said anything to make you feel that way?"

Dane's eyes filled. "No."

"Then why am I hearing it? Has someone said something about...us?"

Dane looked away. He wanted to talk about Noel's father. To spill his worry over his job and the fight he wished Charlie would let him accept...but he couldn't do it.

Noel was sick; Dane didn't want to upset him.

"I'm just afraid that's how you see me, is all," Dane said.

"Well, I don't." Noel still looked annoyed. "You're mine. Look around you at all the fine things I own. I have good taste, don't I?"

Dane nodded, feeling like puppy vomit.

"I told you that you're gorgeous, but I can see you don't feel that way, so I'll have to remind you again. Take off your clothes, Dane."

Head down, Dane obeyed.

Naked, and wearing only the collar with NOEL embroidered on it, he waited.

Noel studied him, saying nothing.

And Dane got hard, hot because of Noel's commanding attitude and silent waiting. He cupped his hands over his erection shyly.

"You've been a bad kitty, thinking that I think of you as trash." Noel's voice was silken. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry?" Dane didn't know what to do. What to say. What to feel.

He'd wanted to belong to someone, but somehow had never known it would feel so up close and personal.

He felt like one of his dandelions, out of water. All his happy yellow mashed against linoleum.

"Come here and lie across my lap. Facedown." Noel's voice was firm.

Dane's cock leaped at Noel's tone. He bit his lip, feeling aroused like he had when he lay on the table for Noel.

Not quite daring to meet fiery blue eyes, he studied Noel's slender lap, and then he timidly draped himself across Noel's legs, his bottom sticking up a little, his face pressed against silk bedding. He held his breath.

Noel's cool fingers caressed his ass.

Dane made a needy little sound.

Noel said softly, "You missed me, didn't you, baby?"

Dane nodded. He suddenly felt absurdly fragile. It was like Noel's gentle touch on his rear end was bringing out all the bad feelings.

"I'm angry that you called yourself trash. You deserve to be punished, don't you, for being such a bad kitty? Do you want to be spanked, Dane?"

Dane looked at Noel under his eyelashes. "Yes."

"Jesus! You tease, Dane! You look so fucking hot!" Noel reached between Dane's legs and pinched his sac gently.

Dane gave a little yelp, rubbing his hard-on against Noel.

Noel's hand came down, hard, striking one of Dane's ass cheeks.

Dane squirmed at the first lash, and then his body seemed to lose all tension, so that he could feel it flowing out of him, like water from a tap.

Noel smacked him, holding Dane's gaze sternly.

"I'm sorry," Dane finally said timidly.

"You should be! You are not trash!"

"I haven't felt good since you left, Noel."

"You just need me, don't you, gorgeous? Need me to make you feel better?" Noel was rubbing Dane's reddened ass.

Dane nodded, loving that Noel cared about him.

"Feel better now you've been spanked, don't you?"

Dane nodded again. He could feel Noel's hardness through the bedding. It made him feel needy. He wanted to spread himself and let Noel fill him.

"Do you want your present now, gorgeous?"

"Yes."

Noel smiled. He reached for a bag on the nightstand and shook something out of the plastic. Dane's eyes widened when he saw what it was.

"Know what I'm going to do with this, don't you?" Noel asked. His expression was calm, controlled, like the black statue that was sitting on his dresser. Buddha. Dane knew the happy fat guy was Buddha. The Vietnamese grocer on his block had a Buddha, as well as a cat with one paw raised.

Hushed. "Yeah."

Noel applied lube to the dildo.

Dane's eyes widened at the size.

"You haven't taken anyone, so I thought..." Now there was vulnerability in the blue eyes. "Maybe this would get you used to it." Noel whispered, "Will you let me put it in?"

Studying him, Dane worried about those dark rings around Noel's eyes. "I'd let you do anything to me you want," he said, his cock throbbing.

Noel stroked the dildo back and forth through Dane's crease as Dane lay there, draped over his lap like a blanket.

"It doesn't look like it will fit," Noel said, frowning. "It looked like it would online, but perhaps my research was faulty."

Dane didn't say anything. The thing had KING KONG in bright green letters on one side. He thought it was too big too, but he didn't want to ruin Noel's present.

Noel put lube onto his fingers and then pressed them into Dane carefully.

Dane breathed out a sigh of want. He liked Noel inside him.

"It'll be okay. It'll feel really good," Noel promised, looking uncertain.

Dane remembered this was all new to Noel. He decided that even if King Kong was uncomfortable, he'd do his best not to show it.

"Okay."

Noel's unhurried play aroused him, so he rubbed his sex against Noel.

"Like that, gorgeous?" Noel's voice sounded more confident, like he was smiling again, so Dane smiled.

Noel took his time squeezing more and more lube into Dane until the tube was empty. Dane felt his ass cheeks rub greasily against each other. His body was warmed and stretched as never before.

Noel's finger grazed his prostate, and Dane caught his breath.

"Did that hurt? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, that felt really sensational! 'Cept I can't take this playin' around no more. Please, Noel..."

"You need something inside you?" Noel asked. With a look of awe, he was staring at Dane, watching him writhe on his bed, all brown-muscled skin and long bones and sleepy black eyes.

"Yeah," Dane admitted. He really needed to be fucked.

Noel pressed the dildo gently into Dane's entrance.

Dane's eyes widened as he felt that thickness slowly invade him. It didn't hurt, but it was...

"Oh."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like I'm about to be ridden. Hard." Dane's eyes closed, and he licked his lips. He loved that Noel was filling his ass. At first, he hadn't been sure about taking something big and plastic inside him, but he realized now that it was just what he wanted, because Noel was doing this to him.

"You are." Noel pulled it all the way out and thrust it back, hitting Dane's prostate.

Dane pushed up to take it, his callused fingers clawing the bed as Noel fucked him with the dildo.

The room was silent except for Dane's gasps and the slick sound of the thickness moving inside him.

"Jesus, you are such a slut for it! Dane! Take it, gorgeous!"

The tension snapped when the smooth knob nudged Dane again. He shot all over Noel's lap and then, blinking up at Noel, lay in a messy, sweaty tangle, the thick dildo still sticking out of his ass.

"My God, you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!" Noel marveled.

Closing his eyes, Dane rubbed his face against Noel's nice bedding. He didn't feel like trash now. He felt...gorgeous.

And very sleepy.

"I did good, Noel?" he asked.

Chapter Fifteen

First Blood

"Kiwifruit?"

Noel tried to keep a straight face when Dane pouted.

"But it's...green, Noel. Veggies are green, and I don't like 'em much. Only eat them 'cause I'm a fighter and Charlie don't let me eat dessert all the time."

"I should say not. You'd be fat, and you wouldn't have all these lovely muscles." Noel rubbed his face against Dane's taut bare stomach.

Dane laughed, still naked and loving it. He was lying on Noel's bed, silken olive skin, rumpled hair. Fawn-soft eyes looked at Noel trustingly.

Noel prodded, "You'll like it."

"Can I have chocolate sauce on it?" Dane begged.

"You won't be able to taste it."

"Well, is it better than that cactus thing? I mean, I didn't like that none."

"That pear is considered a delicacy."

"Yeah, I guess." Dane didn't look too impressed. "I liked the raspberries. I can't ever afford 'em, but sometimes I pick 'em up and smell 'em."

"I'll feed you raspberries all the time." Noel combed Dane's hair with his fingers.

"Yours were yellow! I didn't know they came in any other colors." Dane smiled in remembered delight. Noel had fed all the yellow raspberries to Dane. Sometimes, he'd sipped the juice from Dane's lips, which had made Dane tremble with the need to belong to Noel again. He wanted to ask if Noel was going to fuck him, but he felt shy about it.

Noel had insisted Dane stay overnight, though Dane was scared about that. What if Noel's father came home? He hated Dane. But Noel made Dane sleep next to him, and Dane had the strange sense, looking at all those bottles of pills by the bed and Noel's overbright eyes, that he needed Dane.

"Where is it from? I ain't never eaten green fruit."

"New Zealand."

"Is that where they made *Xena: Warrior Princess*?"

Noel blinked. "I have no idea."

"I think that's where they made that show. I used to watch it. I liked her. She was nice even if she used to be evil. So I guess they got green fruit and Xena. I guess that's nice for them."

Noel tangled his fingers in Dane's hair, petting him. "You are so..."

"What, dumb?" Dane reluctantly ate some of the kiwi. "Sweet...and sour at the same time," he noted. He eyed the cut strawberries greedily. There was warmed chocolate sauce to go with them. Noel had fed him one, but now he dumped the entire bowl of heated chocolate on a couple of strawberries. He grinned and reached for them, closing his eyes and moaning at the taste.

When he was done, Noel's predatory lips were there, licking smeared chocolate and then claiming him with a kiss that made Dane's fingers dig into Noel's arms. "You're way happier than you were when I came over last night," Dane said.

Noel blinked. "Why do you say that?"

"Dunno; you just seemed sort of tense and bossy when I showed, but now you're like my Noel again that stayed over at my place with me and Goldie and Blackie and Sparrow."

"Ummmmm." Noel took the warm chocolate and anointed Dane's nipples, watching them harden. He leaned down and licked them, adoring one and then the other while Dane's heels dug into the bed and his penis hardened.

Noel reached for it as he suckled, tugging lazily.

"Do you want me to finger you till you come?" Noel asked in a raspy voice, his blue eyes heavy-lidded.

Dane blinked. "I dunno; I ain't never done that before. Is it nice?"

"I read about it. Come here."

Noel positioned Dane so his ass faced him. He was on his stomach with it raised for Noel's easy access. Noel put Dane's hands in front of him. "Don't move, gorgeous. You aren't to touch yourself while I play with you."

Dane shifted restlessly, already very aroused.

Taking his time, Noel lubed three of his fingers.

Then he pushed them steadily into Dane, who groaned at the thick feel. "Three of them inside you, Dane! Baby, you take them so well."

"Noel!" Dane squirmed, his face taut, his eyes shut. He twitched when Noel found his warm spot and began to prod it gently.

"Oh, Noel! Please...!"

"Kitty has such a slutty ass; needs something inside it all the time."

Dane rubbed himself against Noel's bedding, and Noel allowed it, watching as sweat bloomed on the olive back and Dane's lips quivered as Noel plied him. He marveled at the sight of his fingers buried inside Dane's eager body as he fingered him and made him writhe.

"Noel!" Dane's cock spurted. He rolled onto his back, his body open, so trusting.

Noel reached for Kleenex and tenderly cleaned him off. "Don't I take good care of you, Dane?"

Dane was feeling full and sleepy, but something in Noel's voice made him frown. It was almost like he was pleading with Dane. He turned around so he curled over Noel's slighter body. "You take real good care of me, Noel," he said and felt Noel relax.

* * * * *

Charlie rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he unlocked the gym for the day. He lived over the top of it, which saved him some money, even if he didn't have a real oven, but only a hot plate upstairs. He looked at his watch and wondered where the hell Dane was. He was supposed to be here to help Charlie move some equipment this morning. He looked outside in the alley and didn't see his big-muscled and soft-eyed fighter anywhere.

"Huh," Charlie grunted.

He shrugged, thinking Dane must have slept in. Dane always kept his word. He'd never gone back on it in all the years Charlie had trained him. Taken him in when he had nowhere else to go. Made him a fighter since he knew Dane needed something to feel good about.

Charlie wandered back through his gym, feeling pride in ownership of his smelly dive. All this was his. He'd paid for it out of his own blood and pain.

He climbed into the ring, deciding to do a little shadowboxing to loosen up his old horse muscles before his fighters arrived for the day...

He heard the door bang open and called back to Dane, "Well, 'bout time you showed up!"

"Hey, old man. D'you know who I am?"

Charlie looked over his shoulder and snorted. "Yeah, I know. What the hell you want here? I'd think this place wasn't high-end enough for you no more."

His visitor turned and locked the door behind him, which made all Charlie's muscles tighten.

"Let's you and me talk."

* * * * *

Dane frowned, something on his mind, keeping him from falling asleep like he wanted. Suddenly he shot up in bed, waking a dozing Noel.

"What is it?"

"I was supposed to do some stuff for Charlie today! An' I left Sparrow with Mr. Trent to look after since he was nice about it, but the puppy is kind of...messy. I need to get home."

Noel opened his mouth, as if he wanted to ask Dane something, but then they both heard the front door open.

Noel tensed on the bed, his eyes suddenly like blue glass as he looked at Dane. "There's a servants' entrance one door down. You can take that out of the house so he won't see you. Wait there. I'll send Gilbert to see you home."

Dane blinked, feeling bad somehow, as if he were something Noel was ashamed of.

"Okay." He got up and shoved on his clothes.

"The first door on the left," Noel directed, face remote.

Dane nodded, swallowing. From below, they both heard Noel's father call again.

Dane was at Noel's door.

"Dane, I will come for you again," Noel promised.

Dane tried to smile. He saw the mess on Noel's bed, chocolate and fruit, and he remembered how good he'd felt. Then he opened the door for servants and disappeared quietly down the staircase.

* * * * *

Dane pushed the door to Charlie's Gym open, glad he had managed to get here early enough so Charlie maybe wouldn't be too mad at him. He'd probably only make Dane do a few extra sit-ups or something.

He really wanted to talk to Charlie. He wasn't sure how he was feeling, but he thought maybe kind of bad after Noel had sent him away, and talking to Charlie about it would help. He always seemed to make sense of things.

The lights were still off. Frowning, Dane flipped the switch by the door. "Yo! You around somewhere, Charlie?" he called, feeling cold prickle his back. This wasn't like Charlie. Charlie was always here. The gym was always open by six. Always.

Dane gazed over the ring. His eyes widened in shock. "Charlie!"

"Are you family?"

Dane didn't want to lie, but he had a feeling they wouldn't let him see Charlie if he told the truth. He nodded to the woman. "We have some forms," she began.

"I just want to see him, please?"

"Someone will need to make arrangements."

"I'm sorry; I'm not real good with flowers." Dane had been here for hours. No one would tell him anything! They just scurried by where he sat as if he weren't a real person. As if he weren't sitting there with his head in his hands.

The woman blinked at Dane. "I mean that there are details to be seen to. His insurance and other...things have to be arranged, Mr....?"

"I'm Dane. Can I see him now? Please?"

"Oh, has no one told you?"

"Told me what? I been here all day. Please, I just want to be with Charlie. He'll tell me what to do, and then I'll do it. Normally I manage okay, you know? But finding him...I'm all shook up, I guess."

Her eyes softened, and she came around her desk, not looking so mean now. "Come with me. I'll take you to him."

Charlie was a big man, almost was too big for the bed they'd given him. Dane took it all in, frightened. All the wires and the tubes and the thing that sounded like a heartbeat...it made it all so serious.

"Dane." Charlie spotted him right off. His face was swollen, but it wasn't the worst of it. He'd cried when he'd been lifted on the stretcher. Cried because he hurt so much.

Dane had never seen Charlie Burns cry.

It made him really scared inside.

"Charlie! They didn't let me come see you."

"...was asking for you," Charlie whispered. "Wha' I'm doin' here, Dane?"

"You're in a hospital, Charlie. I done called an ambulance and everythin' for you."

"Good, that's good, Dane." Charlie blinked. "I hate this place. When you're an old...you c-come here a lot." He coughed, and Dane reached with shaky fingers for water for him. Charlie turned his head, and it slopped against the side of his cheek.

"You was...beat up. Bad."

"Oh, right, I 'member now." Charlie closed his eyes a moment. He reached out and took Dane's hand. The veins on his cocoa skin stood out from the sticks of his fingers. Staring at that hand, Dane thought it looked like a broken fan he might find down in Chinatown.

"Charlie!"

"Dane, you are going to have to be brave. Do you think you can do that for me?"

"I don't want to be brave." Dane put his forehead against Charlie's hand.

"I know, son. And I wish you didn't. But my body...it's all broke up inside now, and there's no fixin' it, so you and me, we have to..." Charlie's face tightened, and Dane knew he was hurting. "We have to deal with that. Tough it out. We can do that on account we're both fighters, right?"

Dane bent over Charlie, tracing his face, tracing cocoa lines and looking into warm brown eyes. "I can't go on without you, Charlie."

"Yeah, you can. I've set some things aside for you. Don't I always take care of you?"

Dane's tears fell on Charlie's cold hand. "Please don't leave me, Charlie. Don't go."

"Dane, I have to tell you somethin', only I can't remember now. Where are we?"

"In the hospital, Charlie." Dane saw that Charlie seemed hazier, as if he had taken too many punches. He was going down for the count. Dane could feel it. "Charlie, stay with me. I can't get by no good without you."

"I love you, boy. And I know you'll be okay. You can take care of yourself, do more than that if you want..."

Charlie's hand was in his hair, ruffling it as he had when Dane was much smaller.

Dane had his head resting on Charlie's chest, listening to his heart beating.

Charlie's hand stroked Dane's hair...slowed...faltered...stopped.

Dane made himself look at Charlie. Made himself see what he didn't want to see. He had to be a man, a fighter, like Charlie taught him.

"Good-bye, Charlie," he whispered.

Chapter Sixteen

Invisible

Warming up his muscles, Dane stretched his legs and back against the brick wall of the hospital.

It was still dark outside, but the lack of light was soothing.

He'd cried a lot. His eyes burned.

He ran a hand over the brick and felt its rasp against his fingers. He'd wrapped his hands in the men's. He was still wearing his gray sweats with Charlie's blood on them.

He looked down the gray and brown street, as empty as a closed bowling alley.

And then he didn't know what else to do, so he ran.

"I want you to do your roadwork, kid. No excuses. I want four miles out of you before your next fight. You hear me?"

He started off light. Just barely skipping along.

He could hear the slap of his running shoes echoing through the narrow space where tall, squished buildings made him feel small.

Alone.

Alone now.

He stretched his arms and blew out the hot air inside him, feeling his body stoking up like a bellows.

He ran past a newspaper truck filling up one of the stands downtown. A light fog had rolled in, so the lights seemed distant, like the stars.

He was moving easier now, just beginning to feel the burn in his calves.

He tried to keep up with the truck.

Running stronger now. Punching the air around him. Shadowboxing. Fighting nothing he could see, but it's what he did. Who he was.

His legs moved easily, the fleece around his waist a band of warm sweat.

He ran through the law buildings—all those important people worked here, and he was just a shadow running past. He saw his face reflected in the glass windows, cheeks red, eyes asking why, and then it rippled past, and he was gone.

It was like he was the one who was dead, and no one could see a man like him.

Charlie was gone, making him just a little bit more invisible.

* * * * *

"Dane? Are you in there?"

The door to Charlie's Gym creaked open cautiously. Mr. Trent squinted into the darkness. In his arms, something brown and restless squirmed.

Not getting an answer, Mr. Trent reached for the lights.

They blinked on.

And he saw Dane.

Sitting with his back against the ring, his sweatshirt soaked, with little watercolors of rusts and reds blooming over it like an artist's brush dipped in water.

"I heard about Charlie Burns, Dane. He was a stand-up guy, all the way."

Mr. Trent put down Sparrow, who wagged his tail as he explored this new, empty space.

Behind Dane, Mr. Trent could make out the chalk outline of a body. There was yellow tape around it, marking it as a crime scene.

"Should you be in here, son?"

"Ain't got no place else to go," Dane whispered. "My feet just took me back here. Back to Charlie."

Despite his stiff joints, Mr. Trent managed to work himself down to sitting next to Dane. He looked at him. Then he pulled Dane's head onto a bony shoulder.

Big tears continued to grow and spill silently from Dane's eyes.

"It's my fault!"

"What? Surely not. The cops don't know who attacked him."

"I was s'posed to meet up with him in the morning, but I forgot on account I stayed over with Noel and ate kiwifruit. So while I was havin' kiwifruit, someone beat Charlie."

"Dane, whoever did this just would have come back another time. It seems as if this person really wanted to hurt Charlie. He wasn't robbed; he was just beaten. So you can't hold yourself responsible."

Dane shook his head. "I hear you say the words, and I know...I know that's right, what you're sayin', but inside, I just don't feel it, you know? I feel like he's dead because of me."

Sparrow chewed on one of Dane's shoes until Dane lifted the little guy gently into his hand, stroking him over and over as hot tears splashed the back of his hand and the puppy's fur like rain that would never stop falling.

* * * * *

Dane got off the phone. He was back at Mr. Trent's apartment now. He'd taken care of his fish and fed Sparrow, but he hadn't taken any time for himself, so he was unshaven and still wearing his bloodstained sweats.

"I have to meet with the dude who did all of Charlie's fixings."

"His executor? Do you need help arranging for Charlie's...?" Mr. Trent cleared his throat. Dane had finally stopped crying, but his eyes looked blasted by grief.

"No. Charlie made... He had that all set up," Dane said. He rubbed his forehead. "I dunno why this guy wants to see me."

"Charlie probably wanted to make arrangements for you too, Dane."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because you were his," Mr. Trent said firmly. "Just because he's gone, doesn't mean he wanted to stop taking care of you. Love...doesn't stop just because someone's gone." Mr. Trent looked at the picture of his wife that Dane had rescued and returned to him. He glanced back and saw Dane's lips tremble, so he decided to make some milky tea. He added a bit of whiskey to it. "I'll go with you, if you like."

"Oh, would you, Mr. Trent? I don't want to bother you none, but I'm kind of scared. This guy who wants to see me is a lawyer and everything. Like on *Law and Order*?"

"Should you call your young man?"

Dane gave the old-fashioned black phone a longing look before his brown eyes saddened. "No. Noel only wants me to play around with."

"Dane, you are a sweet, loving young man. You deserve better. You know that, right?" Mr. Trent handed him some tea. Dane made a face, but he had to drink what was offered him. Charlie had taught him to be polite that way.

"Naw, I don't want to bother him with my problems."

* * * * *

Mr. Trent followed a dazed Dane into Charlie's apartment. The executor had arranged for everything Dane didn't want to go to Charlie's favorite charity, so Dane was here to take a look around first.

Mr. Trent took Dane's hand. "This will be hard. Think of it as gifts, gifts that Charlie wanted you to have."

"I don't know how to handle all this stuff, Mr. Trent. It's too much!"

"Art school, Dane! You can do that now, with what Charlie left you."

Dane's big fingers brushed the hot plate. "He didn't even have an oven. What was he doin', saving all that money so long?"

"He was saving it for you, Dane. Because he loved you. Because he wanted to make sure you were secure."

Dane covered his face, and Mr. Trent rubbed his back. "Come now, you need some sleep. We'll come back here later and do this."

Tame as a fawn, Dane let the small elderly man lead him from Charlie's empty rooms.

Mr. Trent looked in at Dane and saw he was asleep, his big body curled around a sleeping Sparrow. He'd ordered him to shower and, when he'd gone to do that, had taken Dane's sweats to toss in his own garbage. He didn't want Dane to see them again.

He went back to his apartment, hesitated a moment, and then made a call.

Chapter Seventeen

Trash

"I'm afraid that at this time we don't have any work for you, Dane," Ms. Flemming told Dane firmly, as if wanting to cut him off before he could argue.

Dane listened dully. His throat felt too tight for words anyway.

"The university will get in touch with you should we ever require your services again. You'll receive your next pay stub and check in the mail." She hung up before he could say anything. Dane stared at the receiver and then put it down.

Mr. Trent came over with more milky tea. "Lose your job, son?"

Dane nodded. He sat down and cupped his hands around the warm drink as if it were his only comfort.

"Charlie's gone now, so I didn't have a chance of dealin' with it. He always kept fightin' stuff like that, until people would give in to him, but I'm not Charlie."

"You don't need that job. Charlie left you the gym."

"Yeah, Charlie even asked Jackson, that guy he trained years ago, to help me learn the ropes. I guess he thought it all through, knew one day he wouldn't..." Dane swallowed thickly. "Wouldn't be around no more." In a jerky movement, Dane got up and headed for Mr. Trent's tiny kitchenette. "I need a bit more sugar, Mr. Trent."

"Son, no! You're my guest; I'll get it for you —"

Mr. Trent had his hand on Dane's bicep, trying to steer him out of the kitchen, but Dane had already opened the cupboard where the sugar was stored. And seen cat food. And nothing else. He frowned and opened the other cupboards. There was no coffee. No soup. No anything but tea, a single plastic bottle of whiskey, and cat food. "I didn't know you had a cat, Mr. Trent."

Mr. Trent sagged. "I don't."

"Then why you got all this pet food?" Dane wrinkled his nose at the tuna. He didn't like fish much. It tasted...well, fishy. Also, it bothered him, since he was eating one of Goldie's friends.

"Pet food is cheaper than human food. I can't afford much since they raised our rent in this rat hole." Mr. Trent wore the same look he'd had when Dane had retrieved his wife's photo, as if he wished he could have been the one to do it.

"That ain't right!" Dane slammed the cupboard doors closed — *bam! bam! bam!* "You fought for our country. This is wrong, Mr. Trent!"

"No, kid, this is life if you live too long."

Dane paced back and forth, showing more vitality than he had since Charlie's death. Suddenly, he swung around. "I can't run that gym on my own, even after Jackson shows me how things are done. I need someone who can help me out. You used to be a bookie, didn't you, Mr. Trent?"

Mr. Trent coughed. "I can keep books, son. That's not quite the same thing..."

"Okay, can you do that for the gym? Keep us from going under?"

Dane took Mr. Trent's arm and led him back to the sofa. "And I'll pay you to do that. I'll also need someone to look after Sparrow when I'm busy taking care of business or training, so I was wondering... Well, I thought I'd move into Charlie's old apartment, and across the hall there's another, but...they need fixing. I don't want to live like this no more. I want...nice. You know? Maybe color I get to choose on the walls?

"Please, will you help me out, Mr. Trent?"

When Mr. Trent looked up, he had tears in his washed-out brown eyes. Dane swallowed, afraid for him, knowing how proud he was, and not wanting to make him feel bad.

"It's you who's helping me out, son, and don't think you're fooling me any, but I will do it. I'll come and live in your building. Only thing is, I'm not really good at renovation stuff either. What about your young man? Didn't you say he had a nice home?"

Dane shook his head. "He don't want me no more."

"I'm sorry. I thought after I...er, well, I expected he'd come by and see you, is all."

"Naw, he liked me, but now...maybe I'm like the bag you leave at the curb, you know? He's all done with me," Dane said.

* * * * *

Dane walked through the empty, closed gym. He brushed a hand against one of the heavy bags and remembered Charlie holding it when he'd shown off for Noel.

Noel.

He missed him so much.

Was he still sick?

He fretted, wondering about the black rings around Noel's eyes.

He remembered what Noel had done to him, and his cock swelled. He sat down and gave a little moan, stroking himself through his jeans. He wished Noel were here so he could strip down and Noel could play with him.

He thought maybe if Noel touched him, it would make him feel alive again, and not so tired, so empty.

Did Noel think about him as often as he thought of Noel?

Impulsively, Dane went to the phone in Charlie's office. His hand hovered over it as he remembered the personal number that Noel had given him. He ached to just hear his voice.

He sat down and stared at the phone.

* * * * *

"Dane?"

Dane saw the car and Gilbert, and a big grin stretched his face. At last! Noel! Noel had come for him!

Gilbert silently gave Dane an envelope.

"Money?" Dane looked at all the greenbacks. They weren't all wrinkled and dirty like money he usually saw, but crisp, as if they'd come straight from the bank.

"Yes, I was instructed to make sure you got that."

"What for?" Dane's brown eyes crinkled. He tried to return the money.

"To take care of you until Master Noel can see you again."

"But..." Dane's eyes suddenly widened. "Does Noel think he has to pay me to —"

"I have to get back," Gilbert said stiffly, looking a little uncomfortable.

"I can't take this! Noel doesn't have to pay for it. He doesn't, all right?" Dane's voice cracked.

"I'm sorry, Dane. He didn't confide in me. He's not been himself. He's been staying in his room, and I believe he's been taking a lot of his pain medication."

Dane watched the car drive off. Then he whirled and shot his fist into the metal door, dented it, and made his knuckles crack and bleed. Thinking, he sagged against the brick wall.

He decided just where he'd go.

* * * * *

The Dark Kitty club wasn't Dane's favorite pick-up place, but it was still light out, so it was as good a place as any. He looked around, hoping to see someone he'd been with before. Someone who'd maybe be a little nice to him.

A hand covered his at the bar.

Alex.

Alex did it for money sometimes, Dane knew. He'd always avoided him, even though Alex tried to be nice to him. His eyes were just too hungry when he looked at Dane.

"All alone tonight, pretty?"

"It's only four o'clock," Dane mumbled. He wondered why he'd come here. He played with his Shirley Temple, eating the cherry that came with it while avoiding Alex's predatory gaze.

"You haven't been here for months. I was sure you had a boyfriend."

Dane took a deep sip, choked, and Alex patted his back. "Oh, so that's the way it is. He broke up with you?"

Dane shifted away. He thought that maybe this hadn't been a good idea, coming here. Charlie had just died, and the funeral was tomorrow, and nothing was like it had been. He wished his life could be what it was a week ago. Then, he'd had a job and a boy and Charlie.

He covered his eyes.

"Rum," Alex ordered. "With Cherry Coke."

A real drink was put in front of Dane. He blinked at it.

He knew better than to drink things given to him by men in places like the Dark Kitty. Charlie had come here with him when he'd first wanted to go catting around to give Dane a few lessons on how to take care of himself. He'd lectured Dane sternly on never leaving his drink or accepting drinks from the men Dane's innocence attracted.

Charlie had wanted Dane to be safe, to be smart.

But Charlie wasn't here anymore.

The lump in Dane's throat felt too huge to swallow.

"Do you think someone still cares what you do, even when they die? 'Cause as much as people tell me that, I don't feel it." He took Alex's drink.

* * * * *

The car arrived that night, at last.

Mr. Trent was pacing the hallway. He looked downstairs and saw Dane's young man. "About time you showed up!"

"I've not been myself..." Noel massaged his leg. "Is Dane here? I've been worried about him. You said he needed me."

Mr. Trent huffed. "Last I knew he was at Charlie's gym, but I went by there and I couldn't find him!"

"Where would he go?"

"Well, the only places Dane ever goes at night the rare times he's out are his art classes or—" Mr. Trent broke off, biting his lip.

"What?" Noel hobbled up painfully to the old man. "Look, I don't know what's wrong, and I'm sorry I didn't come here before, but the truth is..." Noel looked away, his jaw bunching.

Mr. Trent saw his hands were shaking. He had dark circles under his eyes, and he was sweating. "You're an addict, aren't you, boy?"

Noel let out a sigh. "No. Not quite...but sometimes if I take the pain meds my father's physician prescribes for too long, I find it hard to...come back to myself."

"You were in withdrawal the past few days?"

Noel gave a tight nod. "I'm sorry I couldn't come when you called, but I sent Dane some money."

"Money?" Mr. Trent grabbed Noel's arm. "Excuse me, but that might have been the worst thing you could have done!"

* * * * *

In the alley, Dane stared up at the streetlamp. It looked a bit like a hazy, round moon, except it had bugs inside it and he could see the bulb flicker. He leaned against the brick wall.

He felt like crying again.

The drinking wasn't helping, just making him feel more alone somehow.

Alex had convinced him he needed some fresh air to clear his head, and now —

Alex pushed Dane to his knees. Dane swayed, feeling like he was maybe going to be sick. "I like cherries," he mumbled.

"Yeah, so you said. I got one you can suck on." Alex's cock was suddenly in Dane's face. "Dane...shhh, you don't have to be scared. If your boyfriend broke up with you, I'll take over. I've always liked you."

Dane shook his head, though he saw the same loneliness in Alex's eyes, but...

"Come on. I spent a lot of money on your drinks tonight," Alex coaxed. He was caressing Dane's hair. He leaned down and kissed his forehead. "I'm...crazy about you, and you should be with me. We're alike."

"I'm not —"

"Yes, you are. You're no better than the rest of us, even if I heard you dated someone high-class." Now Alex's fingers bit into Dane's cheeks, holding him steady. His eyes were suddenly hard. "Charlie protected you from me, but he's gone now, and I've always wanted you, so if your rich boyfriend won't take care of you, I will!"

Dane's lips brushed Alex's hardness by accident. He turned his mouth aside, sick...dizzy...

Something slammed into Alex's face. Dane watched as it struck again. A...stick?

He jolted to his feet as Alex pulled a knife —

Noel.

Noel, holding his cane.

His face bone white. His lips snarling words.

Dane grabbed for the cane when Noel raised it again.

“No!”

“Whore!” The cane slammed into Dane’s stomach, hitting his healing rib. He gasped and fell, and next thing, his hands scrabbled against the alley wall as he vomited.

Gilbert suddenly appeared, breathless. He grabbed Noel’s shoulder.

“Fuck you, Dane, you tease!” Alex took in the three men staring at him and obviously weighed the odds. “Fuck you all!” he yelled before striding from the alley.

Dane heard Gilbert talking to Noel, trying to calm him.

Dane was afraid to look at Noel.

Gilbert gently raised Dane to his feet, giving him a handkerchief to wipe his mouth and hands. Noel had his back turned, and Dane could see he was shaking.

Dane’s head was pounding, and he was dizzy.

“I didn’t,” he mumbled to Noel’s back.

Noel swung around. His eyes were searing blue, like noon sky. He hobbled over to Dane so they were face-to-face. “I want to kill you right now,” he whispered.

Chapter Eighteen

Come Together

"You were my D-David! I used to look at you in the library and admire the...the proportions of your arms." Noel's arm was next to Dane's head as he leaned against the brick wall. Then he whispered, "I'm sorry. Please, I'm sorry."

Dane felt the moment. Fragile, both of them, broken like glass lying on the dirty asphalt. How had this happened? Charlie gone. Noel calling him a whore...

Then Gilbert intervened. Dane saw compassion in his eyes for Noel, for Dane. "I'm going to put both of you in the car." Gilbert guided Noel, and Noel tugged Dane's wrist, as if Noel couldn't bear to let go, even as his gaze was focused on the alley floor to avoid Dane's eyes.

Gilbert lifted Dane's T-shirt after he settled Noel in the backseat. "No bruising, thank God." He reached out awkwardly and patted Dane's shoulder. "By rights, you should dump Mr. Noel."

Dane swallowed thickly.

Gilbert spoke again. "Dane... Luke, the healer, said, 'His sins, which are many, are forgiven, for he has loved much.'"

Dane frowned. He had a feeling that the driver was as wise as Charlie, and Dane should listen to him. What was he trying to say?

"I didn't," Dane repeated flatly as they drove. He was sitting in one corner while Noel was slumped in the other.

Noel said, "He was...very attractive. Not a cripple who can't —"

Dane folded his arms. "He's not you."

Noel shifted in his seat, still not meeting Dane's gaze. "Why the hell did you go to that place?"

"I messed up. You gave me money for lying down for you, and Charlie's funeral is tomorrow —"

"What?" Noel's nostrils flared. He reached up and snapped on the overhead light. He glanced at Gilbert. "Give us some privacy, please, Gilbert, and just...drive around for a while."

Gilbert studied Noel. "Yes, sir." He looked satisfied as the panel slid shut, leaving Dane and Noel alone together in the back of the big, important car.

They sat in awkward silence for a moment, Dane peering anxiously at Noel's averted profile. Dane snuffled, and suddenly Noel looked at him.

Noel made a pained noise and snatched a willing Dane into his arms, crushing him.

Noel's hand slid into Dane's hair, comforting him. "Stop."

"Everything's messed up!"

"Dane, what happened to Charlie?" Noel asked gently. He raised Dane's face, holding it in his palms.

"Someone...came into the gym while I was with you and beat him. Broke his ribs and...then Charlie —" Dane broke off, shaking his head, not able to say the words.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry! I didn't know, or I swear I would have come sooner!"

Dane collapsed into Noel's arms. Noel held the longer, bigger body while Dane wished he could crawl into Noel's skin and curl up inside him like Sparrow.

Noel kissed his cheeks. "I didn't know. I didn't know."

"You didn't call me," Dane accused. His brow wrinkled. "I thought you'd got what you wanted from me."

Noel blinked. "No, I'm fairly sure that will take several thousand years."

"Y-yeah?" Dane rubbed his face against Noel's neck, needy for reassurance.

"Yes." Kiss. "So after Charlie...passed, you decided to go to that club? Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't want to bother you none."

"Dane!"

Dane burst out, "It was because you paid for it, for me to be with you. Why'd you do that? You hurt me, Noel!"

"No, Dane," Noel said firmly, pulling away so his boxer could read the truth on his face. "I sent you the money so I'd know that you had enough to take care of Sparrow and your fish. I was worried about you. I wanted" —Noel sighed — "to take care of you, but I fucked up. I'm not a very good boyfriend, I guess."

"So you don't see me as trash?"

Noel's temper flared in his eyes, but he took a deep breath, mastering it this time. "No, I see you as mine," Noel said, very softly. "Did I...God, did I hurt you, Dane?"

"My feelings. You don't hit so good." Dane shrugged.

There were unshed tears in Noel's eyes as he buried his face against Dane's neck and whispered, "Thank God for that!"

Noel pulled away moments later, his expression sober, open to Dane. He lifted his hands, which were shaking. "I have a problem. I didn't want you to know."

"You ain't alone anymore, Noel. You got me and Sparrow and Goldie and Blackie."

"Dane...when I'm in pain from my leg, I feel bad about myself, how I'll never be like you." Noel looked out the window at the storefronts whizzing past. "I...I have trouble finding my way back sometimes. The last time it happened, it took months. My father helped me. Insisted I spend more time at the university." Noel looked back at Dane, and streetlamps colored his shy smile. "My life was gray and then...you."

Stroking the back of Noel's hand, Dane knew he was being honest, giving himself over to Dane, as Dane had once given himself to Noel.

"These past few days, I felt trapped. As if my father wanted me to stay in my bed, under his roof. But I'm not his little boy anymore. I want to be with you. I want to try to be a man for you."

"You don't have to feel ashamed, Noel. I know lots of guys who have problems with wanting to be stronger and stuff, and maybe bein' down about who they are. But you'll need to get help. Charlie always made sure those guys got help."

"You took your clothes off for me once. Put yourself in my hands," Noel said. "Now I'm naked. I'll...see someone, I promise. Do you want me to take you home now?" Noel brushed Dane's hair back from his forehead.

Dane nodded. "But only if you promise to stay with me. It ain't right we sleep apart, you hear what I'm saying? 'Cause people in love should share the same bed."

Noel leaned his forehead against Dane's. "Yes, they should."

Gilbert slid the car next to the broken concrete curb in front of Dane's apartment building.

Noel climbed awkwardly from the car with Dane and looked back at Gilbert. "I'm staying here with Dane. In fact, I'm moving in with him. Please have my things packed and brought over."

A broad grin broke out on Gilbert's face. He came around the car and put a hand on Noel's shoulder.

"You don't think less of me for loving...another man?" Noel asked.

Dane had his arms wrapped around Noel, his face buried against Noel's neck.

"How could anyone not love this young man?" Gilbert asked with a twinkle in his eye. "I think I fell for him the first time I picked him up. Your boxer is very special, and if I may say so, sir, you are a very lucky man."

Noel nodded. "Thank you, Gilbert. I know that my father and his friends won't see it that way, but I need Dane."

Dane led Noel into his room, holding his hand.

Shyly, they looked at each other.

Then Dane shoved the door shut.

And Noel locked it.

Chapter Nineteen

First Time

"You weren't supposed to kill the old man!" Arthur stormed.

"Listen, you see these bruises? Charlie had it coming! Who knew an old guy like that could still put up a fight?"

"I wanted no part in...removing someone permanently. Merely putting Charlie Burns in the hospital would have been enough."

"I did send him to the hospital." Narone laughed when Arthur glared at him. "He just didn't stay there."

Arthur heard a knock and glared his visitor to silence. "Yes?" he called.

Gilbert opened the door. "Master Noel has instructed me to remove all his clothing. He's going to be moving into a new residence, sir."

"What?" Arthur's drink fell from his hand. "No, he can't... Noel needs me! He needs me to make sure he makes the right decisions, to take care of his leg."

Gilbert saw that Arthur was swaying, so he went over and took his arm.

Arthur shook him off. "I need to think. Get out!" he snapped.

Gilbert's mouth tightened. "I will be accompanying the young master to his new residence."

"You're quitting?"

"No, sir. I have been Master Noel's driver for years. I'm going to remain working for him."

"Where is he going to live?" Arthur caught Gilbert by the door.

"He is moving in with a...friend."

The door shut, and shaking, Arthur leaned against it. "No," he whispered. "Not my son too... Not Noel. I won't let him be that way."

"Look, what do you want me to do now?" Narone demanded, looking bored.

Arthur straightened. His eyes hardened. "We go with the same plan. Get that fag into the ring. Kill him if you have to, but I want him out of my son's life."

Narone smiled. "Okay, now you're talking."

* * * * *

Outside the door of Arthur's study, Gilbert hesitated, thinking over what he'd heard before he'd knocked. Had Arthur...?

He rubbed his forehead, throat tight.

He'd told Arthur he was leaving – choosing the son over his father, but was he?

Gilbert had to think.

* * * * *

Dane put his hands in his pockets shyly. He looked at Noel. "I know this place is a dump, but Charlie left me a big apartment above the gym. I figured...maybe you could do it up for us. You can paint the walls any color and stuff, 'cause I'm the landlord."

Noel studied Dane. "You're the only thing I see in this room, and you...are beautiful, Dane. As much a work of art as the *David* in Italy."

Dane's eyes filled. "You mean that, Noel? You was so mad! I was scared 'cause you was so mad!"

Noel limped over to Dane's bed, sat down, and rubbed his leg. "I was angry because my heart is involved."

"Huh. That's kind of what Gilbert tried to tell me, only he said some dude called Luke figured it. You mean you like me, right? I knew it!" Dane crowed. "Listen, I'll have to go get Sparrow from Mr. Trent soon, only...I was thinking, maybe I'd get him, uh, after. 'Cause Sparrow might see you and me, you know, get things on? And he's only a little guy." Blushing, Dane looked down at his big hands. "I mean, if you want to, uh, fool around. Maybe you don't want that, and that's A-okay. I'm totally okay with being just friends until you want to do me again."

"Dane." Noel held out his hand, and Dane bashfully took it. "I want to try to fuck you, but...I'm not sure how good I'll be. I'm not very strong, and my leg is..."

"Yeah, but I'm not dating your leg. I'm dating you. Noel, can I see you? All of you, this time?" Dane begged wistfully.

Noel stood up and pulled his shirt over his head, revealing soft white skin and puckered nipples. The green light of the two aquariums rippled over Noel's body, making it seem as if he were undressing in another world.

Dane kissed Noel's lips.

Noel gripped Dane's shoulders and kissed him back, the exchange gentle and affectionate. Dane teared up again, and Noel pulled him into a tight hug. "Baby, please don't."

"I can't help it! So much stuff has happened, and now you're here..."

"Shhhhh." Noel unzipped his pants and let them fall; his eyelashes were down, and his hard-on prodding from behind charcoal silk boxers. Dane reached for the elastic and helped free Noel.

When the clothing fell, Noel was silent, not meeting Dane's gaze. Dane looked down and saw one scarred leg was paler and thinner than the other. Clumps of muscle and little hollows disfigured it.

Dane got down on his knees and pressed a kiss to Noel's scarred knee. "I love you, knee, because you belong to Noel."

"Dane!" Noel grabbed his shoulders. "It's ugly."

"It's beautiful like a boxer. All marked up and hurtin', but still game, you know? Your leg is beautiful."

"Oh, Dane." Now Noel's eyes were moist.

Dane leaned closer and rubbed his open mouth against Noel's leg. "I love your leg so much because it's really part of who you are. If you hadn't been hurt, you would never have cared about me like you do. You woulda been married and had kids or somethin', and I would have been lonely."

Noel caressed Dane's hair. "We're tired and...emotional. If we're going to try this..."

"We can wait," Dane whispered.

"Can we? After everything we've been through, I feel like something will happen soon and separate us, and I want to be close to you. I want to be inside you, just once, even if I'm not strong enough to do it right."

Dane climbed to his feet and pulled Noel against him, body to body, foreheads resting against each other while they just breathed.

Then Dane swept Noel off his feet and placed him carefully on the cheap single bed. Holding Noel's gaze, taking in his flushed cheeks and wide eyes, Dane opened a drawer and pulled out lube and a condom.

Noel looked at the condom. "I've never put one on."

Dane smiled. "I can do it for you, no worries." He opened the package and then rolled it gently over Noel's stiffness.

Noel bit his lip and made a helpless sound at the feel of Dane's fingers on his cock. "There, Daddy's all ready now," Dane said before he kissed Noel.

Noel slapped Dane's thigh. "Make yourself ready for me, gorgeous."

Dane lay back, opening his legs so that his big cock and balls were fully exposed. He took the lube and slathered a huge dollop onto his hand. "You ain't small, Noel," he commented. He pushed two fingers into himself, smoothing and stretching, rubbing deep. When he touched his prostate, his eyes half closed and he jerked, his cock flexing as he pleased himself.

"Fuck, that's hot!" Noel growled. He climbed on top of Dane and pressed his wrists back, flat on the bed. "You look so slutty when you play with yourself."

Noel reached down and palmed his own penis, freeing Dane's wrists. Dane kept his hands above his head, watching Noel, trusting him.

"My knee... I won't last long," Noel confessed, shamed. "If I do it too long, I might have a muscle spasm."

"It'll be okay, you'll see." Dane rubbed Noel's back. "Why does how long you can do it matter? You'll be inside me, Noel."

Noel maneuvered himself awkwardly. It hurt, this position, but he wanted to look into Dane's eyes while they made love for the first time. He pushed against Dane's entrance, and sweat broke out on his hairline and the back of his neck. He and Dane watched as Noel's cock went inside.

"How does that feel?"

"Um, sort of burns, but we haven't got to the good part yet." Dane bit his lip, trying to hold still for Noel.

Noel made to pull out.

Dane purred and raised his ass, which helped Noel slide deeper past his resistance so that Noel popped through. Noel's eyes widened in awe. "I'm inside you!"

"Where you belong," Dane said smugly.

"Dane, this isn't a good position for my leg..." Noel's face tensed, because he'd never felt this good. He could feel how close he was, just from watching himself go inside the exquisite body of his boxer. Just from watching Dane when he'd made himself ready for Noel.

"Fuck me, Noel. Please?" Dane begged. He pushed up, his strong body matching Noel's tentative and gentle thrusts. He took hold of Noel's hips and steadied him, holding his weight so that Noel had greater thrusting power.

Dane used all his boxer's muscles to make it easy to be fucked by Noel.

"Look at how it slides in!" Noel marveled at the new experience, Dane's strong arms lifting him and giving him the added strength to move. He felt like he was flying! Being with Dane, seeing him shudder, seeing his eyes heavy and how he bit his lip, loving the feel of Noel's cock inside him.

"I wanted you to fuck me for so long, Noel." Dane thrust up, taking as much as he could, his body asking for every inch that Noel could give him. His eyes closed, and he purred at the feeling of gentle nudging to his gland. Noel couldn't slam in and out, so it was like butterfly kisses.

Noel leaned down, and they nuzzled, exchanging wonder, breathless heat.

"Your face...the way you look from having me inside you." Noel cupped Dane's cheek. "You want to be fucked. You love it. Baby, that's so hot!"

Dane's hands dug into Noel's slowly working ass. Noel was slick with sweat, trying so hard to please his larger, muscled lover, his slight body lean and pale compared to the warm olive of Dane.

"When I met you, I felt...dead. But you wouldn't leave me alone. You made me want you. Made me want this."

Dane watched Noel's face, seeing the strain as well as the pleasure. He sat up a little, his legs spread wide, and arranged their bodies so he was sitting on Noel's lap. "I'll fuck your cock," he offered.

"Oh, God. If you do that, I won't last! And I want to please you, Dane."

"You feel so good in there." Dane slammed himself down.

Noel's hands dug into Dane's hips as Dane moved, pounding his own ass. Licking his lips, Dane let his head fall back and knew that Noel was watching his face, lit with the theater of their desire.

Noel took Dane's penis and began a gentle handjob, and his gentleness was what set Dane off. Other men touched him with carelessness, like milking a cow. Up and down. Rough. Noel touched him with appreciation and...love.

He wasn't a piece of meat to Noel.

"Noel..." Dane gasped. He was close now. He was going to come before Noel did.

"Shhhh, come for me, beautiful."

Noel reached down and squeezed Dane's balls, then watched as Dane spurted, moaning as his orgasm was one reflex after another. He leaned his head against Noel, and Noel's arms went around him.

"What about...?" Dane saw Noel hadn't come.

Noel's face was tight. "I need to... I can't stay in this position. One of my muscles is cramping. I knew this would happen! I'm sorry, Dane."

Seeing that Noel was in distress, Dane climbed off him. He pushed him on his back and took Noel's knee in strong hands, digging into the spasm.

Noel bit his lip, shamed by the failure of his body. It hurt, having the muscle worked. He found himself wishing for some of his strong relaxants, but those left his mind cloudy for hours. He didn't want to use them anymore.

Dane never lost patience. His hands kept up the work on Noel's bad leg until the cramp finally eased. "You're just out of shape, is all, and we need to experiment with new positions and stuff. There's a book I saw once with all kinds of ways to do it, only it's not in English."

"*The Kama Sutra*?" Noel smiled at the idea of him and Dane using that.

"My arms are strong enough I could hang from the ceiling while you do me," Dane bragged demurely.

Noel stared at Dane.

Dane smirked.

Noel burst into laughter. "God, you're special. You don't even see how remarkable you are. You have this gift...for making people happy."

Dane peeled the condom off Noel's softness and then took that softness into his mouth, feeling it stiffen and grow under his suction. "This is the only cock I want in my mouth, Noel," he promised.

Dane refused to give up on Noel. He laved his penis, squeezing Noel's balls and letting his tongue wander down so he found Noel's pucker. He entered it, which soothed Noel and made him moan. Made all the hurt and the failure burn away.

Giving in to Dane's loving ministrations, Noel creamed in Dane's mouth. He huffed, relaxing as Dane leaned his head against Noel's bad leg while caressing it softly and watching Noel catch his breath.

Dane's hand found Noel's, their fingers entwining as they recovered from sex.

Noel looked idly over at Goldie with dazed eyes. "I like that you have fish. I think in our new apartment we'll have more."

"Yeah?" Dane brightened at how Noel was agreeing to decorate the new place they'd share. "You've fallen for Goldie," he said, smiling.

"I've fallen for you," Noel said.

Chapter Twenty

Knockout

Dane ran his hands over the sheet of glass that was one wall in Charlie's old — now gutted — apartment, which his Noel referred to as a loft. He took in the polished concrete floors with paint resins in gold and amber sunk into them. Dane had been fascinated when the craftsman who specialized in doing colored concrete came by after they tore up the old linoleum. He'd spotted a turquoise mix and begged Noel to let him sprinkle that as well, since he loved blue, so in their bedroom, the floor was the blue of a peacock feather.

"A whole wall?" Dane marveled now. His eyes were still ringed with shadows from the bad nights. It had been only a little over a week since Charlie's funeral, and Dane wasn't sleeping well. He went out on long runs so he wouldn't wake up Noel in his shitty apartment they were still sharing, though Noel didn't seem to care it was small, cheap, and smelly.

"At night when we lie in bed, we'll see all the different sea creatures. Anemones, that spiny looking fish you liked..." Noel came behind Dane and put his arms around him. They hadn't made love since the first time. Noel's leg was bothering him, and he kept making excuses, self-conscious about it, and...Dane was grieving.

"Puffer fish." Dane smiled, remembering when Noel had taken him to the huge downtown aquarium shop. He'd thought he was in heaven. And they weren't putting freshwater in this tank. It was going to be a solid wall, floor to ceiling, of salt water. A custom habitat, the man at the store called it.

The wall was the only screen in the open space for their bedroom, where a king-size, leather-tufted bed presided. It had arrived today, along with a new mattress. Tonight they'd sleep here for the first time. Dane was nervous about it. What if he messed up the new furniture? He didn't even know how to work the sink in their fancy

bathroom, which was as large as his old apartment. All he had to do was position his hands under the silver spigot and water fell, but he forgot that and still tried to turn it on. It made him feel stupid – as if all this new stuff were smarter than he was.

"I can't believe how much you've done since..." Now Dane's breath snagged as he felt that punch of grief tighten his throat. He closed his burning eyes. How could things be so good, with Noel living with him, and yet be so bad, with Charlie haunting him every time he went down to the gym?

"I want to make it perfect for you." Noel kissed his cheek. "I want to...make things up somehow."

Dane frowned, turning to look at Noel. "You can't make up for what I lost, Noel. Charlie's...gone. All these things? They're great, but...he's gone, and he ain't comin' back."

"Gorgeous, I just want you to sleep through the night." Noel sighed, then went on in a whisper, "Stop hurting so much. Stop, please. I can't bear it."

"It's 'cause it's my fault –"

"It's not!" Noel's eyes flamed angry blue at the repeated words.

Dane dropped his gaze, shamed. "I can't help how I feel inside, Noel. It's like bein' gay and wantin' cock up my ass. It's how I'm made. I'm made to hurt for Charlie. Made to keep missin' him and wishing I'd been here that day."

"Dane, what if whoever it was had a gun?" Noel shook Dane gently. Then he continued, shocking Dane. "I'm glad you weren't here! And I know Charlie would tell you the same."

Dane turned away, confused and upset. "I should go see how Mr. Trent is doing with his unpacking."

Noel's hands dropped.

Dane felt his gaze on him, burning into his back, but he had to get away.

Across the hall in Mr. Trent's apartment, Dane unboxed the new equipment in the sparkling kitchen. It was oval shaped, sort of like what you'd see on a science-fiction TV show. Noel said it was Italian. He uncrated a sparkling espresso machine sheathed in copper and smiled as he took it out of the box.

"No more milky tea?" He gave a hopeful grin to Mr. Trent, who was running his hands over his new yellow microfiber couch. Gilbert was there, also helping the elderly man move in. When Gilbert had said he was going to stick with Noel, they'd added an extra room to Mr. Trent's loft, with Mr. Trent's permission. So now he and Gilbert would be roommates, starting this evening.

Mr. Trent laughed. "I just couldn't afford anything better."

Dane laughed as well, happy that Mr. Trent was happy. "You can have cappuccinos and mochas and iced mochas with this thing. Not that you'll need too many iced lattes now, since it's air-conditioned," Dane pointed out proudly.

Noel had insisted that new units be retrofitted in both apartments and the gym below. Soon, the gym itself would be renovated. The fighter's old-fashioned equipment would stay, but it would be smartened up. Charlie had left Dane a lot of money, but it was Noel who was insisting on paying for things. It turned out that his mother had possessed all the wealth that Noel's father made use of. Noel had finally taken control of that wealth, though until he'd moved out, he'd never dared to even spend his allowance as he liked.

"How are you, son?" Mr. Trent put a gentle hand on Dane's muscled shoulder. Dane was wearing sweats and an old T-shirt with the arms ripped off. He was going to work out in the gym after he helped out Mr. Trent and Gilbert.

"M fine," he mumbled, avoiding sharp brown eyes.

"Still not sleeping all night? I have some medication I took when I lost my wife. It may be you need that now."

Dane shook his head. "I just... I'll be doin' something, and it will be okay, and then it's like my body needs to cry or something. I saw him every day. Every day for years. He taught me how to read. How to be a man. How to be stand up." Dane covered his eyes, and Mr. Trent directed him over to the couch and patted Dane's back. "W-why do I keep cryin'? When will I stop? I feel like I'm not bein' what I should, like I'm not the man he'd expect, carrying on this way, Mr. Trent."

"How does a real man grieve? It seems to me that there is no shame in what you feel. I'm only sorry you continue to carry the guilt you do, boy. That's a useless emotion, and I thought you were smarter than that."

Dane shook his head. "I feel like...I have to pay for what I did. I have to..."

"Atone. We've talked about that, Dane, but you can't save everyone."

Dane looked up and saw Noel leaning against the apartment's open door. He was staring at Dane with lonely-looking eyes. He was still shy around Mr. Trent and not used to sharing space with Gilbert, with whom he'd always had the distance of servant and master.

"Want to come play with puppy?" Dane asked him, smiling warmly, despite the shadows under his eyes. Welcoming Noel.

"Do come join us, Noel," Mr. Trent encouraged. "I'll make you a cappuccino."

Noel gave a slight smile and nodded as he went inside. When Dane got down on his back so Sparrow could walk all over him and lick him and bite his fingers and his bare toes, Noel hesitantly climbed down too, stretching his leg out in front of him and pulling Dane's back to his chest so he could hold him while Dane entertained the puppy. He didn't let go, even after Sparrow tired and fell asleep on Dane's lap.

Mr. Trent was playing with steaming the milk. He ended up spraying himself and an interested Gilbert, so that both men laughed, already at ease with each other.

Mr. Trent looked over at Noel holding Dane with his eyes tightly closed.

"Boys, maybe we'll have some Remy Martin. I don't think I have the hang of this damned machine yet!"

* * * * *

Dane was using the heavy bag when Noel came down later. Noel was still self-conscious around the other men who used Charlie's Gym. He guessed they all knew he and Dane were together, and Noel was uncomfortable about what they must be thinking. None of them spoke to him, though, preferring to tease Dane, who shrugged it off. Noel thought he'd die of mortification if the fighters were as frank with him as they were with easygoing Dane.

Dane smiled when he saw him, shaking his sweaty hair and taking a break. He nodded to the fighter who had held his bag for him.

"I didn't think you'd still stay in training," Noel began. "I mean, you're enrolling in art college."

Noel was very proud that after he'd sent Dane's secret stash of drawings to a local art college, they'd taken Dane, and Dane couldn't believe it! He'd thought his scribbles weren't that good.

"Charlie told me to get back in shape," Dane said.

Noel pursed his lips, and Dane knew he wanted to remind him Charlie was gone.

Dane turned away, rubbing his neck. How could he explain that...that just because his life had changed so fast, he still hadn't figured it out? He'd been a boxer and Charlie's boy. Now he was going to be maybe an artist, but...it was coming too soon for him to take it in, like hits to the body over and over again. He needed...time. He needed to know who he was.

He knew he was a boxer. His hands knew how to feint and how to deliver an uppercut. He didn't know if they knew how to be a real artist.

The truth was, he was afraid. Afraid to try to be more.

He climbed into the ring and did some light sparring as Noel watched. He was enjoying showing off, but Noel didn't lighten up. His hands curled around the ropes like pale claws, and Dane saw how he flinched whenever Dane took a blow to the body.

Finally, seeing that Noel wasn't appreciating the play, Dane called it off. He took off his headgear, and his partner helped him remove his gloves.

Noel stared, his mouth tight and disapproving.

Dane jumped down lightly and knew he was going to face the music.

"You'll have bruising, Dane!" Noel started.

"I'm always bruised. It ain't nothin', Noel. A fighter has to take the pain and keep goin'." Dane also had been forcing himself to climb back in the ring where he'd found

Charlie. To face up to it. Ride it out, just like Charlie had taught him, but he couldn't find the words to explain that to Noel. He just wasn't any good with words.

In Charlie's old office, Noel watched Dane put on a pair of heavy black glasses. "I didn't know you wore those," Noel said.

"One of my eyes is kind of bad from fighting, so it helps me read better. And Jackson, the trainer who was Charlie's protégé before me, he was very sensational coming here to help me out a little since Charlie asked on account he left this place to me."

Rubbing his forehead, Dane remembered going over the old equipment inventory with Jackson. Jackson was a distant relation of Charlie's, and from working with Charlie and eventually setting up his own gym, he had picked up a lot of similar mannerisms — he even resembled a younger Charlie, except his hair was tight black curls and he wasn't as tall at five-nine. But it had been a bit like being around Charlie, and though Dane was grateful for the help; it made the grief well up, made Dane's chest ache. Here was Charlie, kind of, but *not*, and never again.

"So that's where you were. I missed you in our bed, Dane," Noel said softly, as if he sensed some of the pain Dane was feeling.

Dane cleared his throat. "You know I have trouble sleepin', and this gym, it turns out it don't run itself, Noel." He shrugged. "Now I need to go through the mail..." Dane drifted off as he opened another letter. He shook his head over it.

"What's that?"

"Gerrard Narone's management. He wants to fight me for some reason."

"Oh, but you're going to say no, right? Since you're an artist now," Noel pushed.

Dane looked up. "I'm sayin' no on account Charlie didn't want me fightin' him any."

Noel's eyes narrowed, and he picked up the letter to study it. "Why would Charlie not want you fighting him?"

"'Cause he was a contender for heavyweight champion, Noel. He's one of the top boxers in the country. If he hadn't smacked his wife around, he might be the champ now. Charlie figured maybe he wanted to start at the bottom and make his way back up to the top. And that would be me, the bottom." Dane's eyes twinkled at his double entendre, but Noel didn't smile back.

Noel put the letter down with a smack. "You are not fighting him."

Dane took off his glasses and circled the desk. He rubbed Noel's tense shoulders and gave him a coaxing kiss. "No, I won't, don't worry. I know this...boxing stuff is hard for you. Sort of like how I don't get all that stuff you read? But it's totally okay, baby."

"I can't stand seeing you hurt," Noel burst out. "I hate what you do, Dane!"

Dane shook his head, eyes sad. "It ain't just what I do, Noel: it's who I am."

Noel and Dane returned to the gym so Dane could head for a steam. Noel, still clearly upset, was avoiding Dane's worried gaze. Dane was hoping that maybe on their new bed, he could coax Noel into a better mood with some cuddling and attention.

"Hey, I'm lookin' for the fag who runs this joint," a voice boomed.

Dane turned around, easy grin coming over his face, while Noel stiffened beside him. A man of mixed race who was as big as Dane but more thickly muscled was standing at the door. All the other boxers ceased their workouts to watch the newcomer.

"I'm Dane, and I'm a fag," Dane said simply. "You're Narone. I've seen you fight. You're a real contender."

"I tried to call you out, but you weren't a man about it."

Dane's grin faded a little. His brow creased as he tried to figure Narone out.

Noel put a nervous hand on his arm.

"That your missus?" Narone moved closer, eying Noel up and down. "You like to bend over and take it, sweetie?"

"Back off," Dane growled, all confusion falling away as Narone approached his beloved.

"Heh. Looks like a girl. I can see why you'd want to stick him."

Dane lost his temper and shoved Narone. "I said back off! Noel's mine. Don't even fuckin' look at him!"

"So you are a man..."

"You'll find out just how much a man if you don't leave off talkin' trash to Noel." Dane put a possessive arm around Noel and startled the slighter man by pulling him close. There was nothing submissive about Dane now. His body was vibrating like a gong that had been struck.

"I'm not interested in your girlfriend, fag. I want you to meet me man-to-man in the ring."

Dane shook his head. "No, Charlie told me I wasn't to do that. I won't be disrespectin' him."

Noel's hand was digging into one of Dane's big biceps. He was glaring at Narone, but his eyes also looked scared. It made Dane feel protective. He wouldn't let anything happen to his Noel.

"That the Charlie who got himself beat up?" Narone whispered, coming close enough to Dane so their faces were inches apart. Noel glanced anxiously from one to the other as they locked gazes in a primal standoff.

"He was attacked, yeah," Dane growled.

"Guess this isn't a safe neighborhood for old men...or little blond girlfriends—"

Dane shoved Narone, and Narone retaliated by hitting him and breaking open one of Dane's cheekbones with a heavy gold ring.

"Don't you threaten Noel!" Dane yelled, oblivious to the wound. His voice dropped to a whisper that Noel had never heard from Dane before. "I'll kill you if you even look at him!"

"You aren't always around to protect what's yours, boy," Narone pointed out, smirking. "Like, say, an old man alone here early one morning?"

"You! It was you who hurt Charlie!" Dane thundered. Noel was holding him back with two arms roped around him. He vibrated like a guard dog, furious.

"Can't prove nothin', but if you don't meet me in the ring, I might see how the other half lives, you know what I'm sayin'? Give your pretty little girlfriend a taste of real cock—"

"Dane, no! Don't listen to him!" Noel tried to subdue Dane, but Dane shoved him into another fighter's arms. "Dane, don't do this!" Noel struggled, desperate to be free and stop Dane.

"I'll fight you," Dane said flatly.

Noel sagged in the fighter's arms. "No! Oh, no, Dane!" he whispered.

The man holding him helpless shushed him. "Your man has to stand up. And if that fucker had anythin' to do with Charlie bein' gone, Dane has to set it straight."

"This is not the Middle Ages!" Noel yanked free. "There is no such thing as trial by combat anymore!"

None of the hard-faced men in the gym paid any attention to Noel's distress.

Dane didn't even look at him. He was glaring at Narone.

Narone cracked his knuckles. "You ever take a beating from a sack of potatoes in the gut, Dane? Breaks you up inside so you can't piss and you can't eat. I'm gonna do that to you, fag. Break your fingers and your face, and when I'm done, you'll be in pieces like your old man."

After Narone left, Noel stalked in front of Dane. "I want you to call it off! Don't fight him, Dane, please. We can talk to the police!"

Dane shook his head, looking at Noel like he couldn't make him out. "He killed Charlie. I have to face him."

"Try to kill him, you mean?"

"No. I have to face up to him, because what he done ain't right. When people let things go, that's when bad things happen. I have to stand up, Noel."

Noel was panting, his face white, tears suspended in burning blue eyes. "He's a killer, Dane! Even I can see that."

"I have to do what Charlie taught me."

Noel smashed an angry fist into one of the heavy bags so hard, it swung an impressive arc. He put his hands on his hips and his head down.

Staring at him, Dane rubbed the back of his neck before finally hesitantly going to him. Pleading, he put his hands on Noel's tense forearms and cuddled him from behind. "It'll be okay. I'll keep you safe."

Noel swung around, furious. "Don't you get it, you moron? He challenged you so he could hurt you, possibly kill you! You're just too stupid to see what everyone else does: he's a real fighter. You don't stand a chance. You can't win!"

Chapter Twenty-one

Olive Branch

"Father, how long you think it will take till Charlie qualifies for sainthood?" Dane asked Father Ralph.

Father Ralph sat down next to Dane at the church pew, the priest's knuckles fat and swollen with arthritis so they bulged out from the skeletal thinness of his finger joints.

"Ah, good to sit a bit, isn't it? Sainthood... Well, the church makes that a complicated thing, Dane. Sort of like being an Olympic runner — only a few qualify."

"But God knows he's a saint, though, right?" Dane frowned, rubbing his hands over his best jeans. "I mean, he knows it even if the church ain't so sure."

"God knows that Charles Burns was a good man, yes."

Father Ralph took Dane's hand and squeezed it.

"He didn't care I was slow or liked boys...and thank you very much for lettin' me still come here even though I like boys."

"I see you brought flowers. Are they for Charlie?"

"Yeah, he liked red. I thought I'd drop by and say hi, you know? You think maybe he'll know I did that?"

"Of course. He's watching you from heaven now, Dane."

"Good. That's real good, Father, even though I think he'd get bored up there with them clouds and harps, but maybe God would let him arrange a boxing match. I heard some of them angels like to fight a lot."

Father Ralph smiled and followed Dane as he headed outdoors to visit Charlie's grave.

"Father?" Dane kicked at some sod, biting his lip.

"Yes, Dane?"

"How long does it take till you're okay again? I mean, I know I should feel bad for Charlie, 'cause he's the one dead, but I can't seem to do that. I feel bad for me, 'cause I can't see him no more."

"Oh, Dane." Father Ralph sighed. "I know he was like a father to you. It's never easy to lose a parent. It's like losing our childhood, our security...and the love of someone who was there, good times and bad. So the answer to your question is...you'll hurt for a while, like a wound, and then it will get a little bit better. But you'll always miss him. Just remember that one day you'll see him again."

"Think maybe I'll be one of his boxers again? If God doesn't mind me hitting other guys, I mean?"

"I'm sure you will, Dane." He gave Dane a pat on the shoulder, and then Dane was left alone to make his way to the little tree where they'd laid Charlie out.

He got on his knees, and after taking the flowers out of the cellophane bag and putting them inside the little cup, he arranged the flowers in front of Charlie's grave.

"I guess since you ain't qualified for bein' a saint yet, I don't pray to you, Charlie, so it'll just be like old times with us talking. Maybe you think...it's funny, me sayin' you deserve that honor, but see, when I met you, my mom didn't like me much and my old man was gone. I didn't have no one. I wasn't so sure, you know, back then, what I was going to do, and I was...scared, Charlie." Dane played with a red carnation. He wondered if Charlie could still smell it up in heaven. Was that too far away? Did dead people smell when they went to heaven?

"You know, I was scared back then, and no one seemed to care...or see me. Then I met you, and you saw me. You gave me my first job, cleaning up your gym. After a while, you let me be a sparring partner for some of the other fighters, and then when I started getting the hots for boys, you made it not so scary for me, just said I was made that way, like some buildings are made to be houses and some are meant to be banks. I never told you how much you helped me when you was alive." A tear hit Dane's hand where he was rubbing the petals of a red rose. "I love you too, Charlie. I hope it ain't too late to say that. I hope you know that somehow."

"Hi," Noel said, breaking Dane's reverie.

"Hey." Dane scrubbed his cheeks, embarrassed to be caught bawling. Noel probably thought he cried all the time or something!

"You didn't sleep in our bed last night."

"Um, no. Figured I shouldn't do that since you was maybe still mad, so I slept on Mr. Trent's new couch, which was okay, you know? 'Cause it was long enough. Just...in case you were wonderin', should you ever want to sleep on it."

"I'm not angry," Noel said quietly. He looked pale and defeated, like a party balloon that had lost all its hot air. "What I am is scared, Dane."

Dane inched closer. He wanted Noel to hug him. If he did that, Dane knew things would be okay again. "Yeah, I'm scared too."

"I just have to say this: getting beaten by some vicious thug is not about being a man!"

Dane rubbed his neck, which was stiff from sleeping on Mr. Trent's sofa. "We're so...different, you know? You want we should break up?" he whispered, miserable.

Noel swallowed. "Is that what you want?"

"I'll get on my knees and beg you to take me back if I have to, only don't ask me not to be a man, 'cause I can't do that, not even for you."

Noel sighed, looking away. Dane looked away too, putting his hands in his pockets, wishing he knew how to get close to Noel again. How come things had got so messed up?

Finally, Noel said, "I'm sorry I called you a simpleton."

"Oh, you didn't call me that!" Dane reassured Noel. "I woulda remembered."

"No, I mean...I called you stupid."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, I am, right? I know it! That's totally fine, what you said."

Noel hobbled closer. "No, it wasn't. It's me who is stupid. And I'm sorry."

"Yeah?"

Noel nodded. "I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about what I said and worrying about you. Dane. You said one of your eyes is bad, so what if this man damages it and you can't be an artist?"

Dane shrugged.

Noel took a deep breath. "What if he kills you like he did Charlie?"

Dane didn't know what else to do, so he took hold of Noel. "I won't let him kill me," Dane vowed.

"How can you say that? You can't make a promise like that!" Noel thumped Dane's big shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Noel." Dane dared to bend down and kiss Noel's lips.

Noel grabbed his arms, his fingers digging in. "If anything happened to you...!"

"Shhhh."

"Please don't fight him. Please."

Dane swallowed, wishing that Noel would ask him for anything else. Anything.

Noel sighed. "I have to go."

"Where to?" Dane asked, putting his hands in his pockets again to keep from reaching out and touching Noel.

"Faculty luncheon."

"Oh. Well, look at the bright side, at least they feed you."

"Would you like to come with me?" Noel offered, surprising Dane.

Dane could see the big black car and Gilbert off in the distance, waiting for Noel.

"Naw, I'm just dressed in jeans, and I ain't very good with...you know, people."

Noel frowned. "That's not true. You're wonderful with people."

"I mean...I'd make you look bad. I'm not good with smart people, you know?"

"You're good with me," Noel pointed out.

* * * * *

Dane looked at the smorgasbord that was set up in the university faculty lounge. There were tiny sandwiches that weren't square, but triangles. Some had cucumbers in them; Dane had opened them and checked. He didn't want those ones. There were floating shrimp in big metal pots. And there was dessert! Lots and lots of desserts! Tarts, cake, pie, and those little pastries like a girl's dress Dane loved. He wanted one of each color.

"Dane?"

He looked up to see Ms. Flemming standing next to him. She had chosen cheese and fruit from the dessert table, and Dane felt sorry for her. All those little cakes! How could she settle for cheese?

"Hey!" He smiled at her. "I think I might have the pink cake. I like pink."

"What are you doing here? You were...removed from our employ."

"Oh, I'm here with Noel," Dane said, putting another dessert on his plate. He hadn't had breakfast, and he really wanted to eat it, but he figured he couldn't on account of a lady was standing next to him.

Just then, a man with frosty white eyebrows and a way of carrying himself that made Dane think he was the head rooster walked over. "I saw you with Noel," the stranger said to Dane.

"Yeah." Dane smiled. He wasn't sure what else to say. He wanted to announce Noel was his boyfriend, but what if that embarrassed Noel? "He's my friend," he finished.

"Have we met? You look familiar," the man said.

"He's the janitor, sir," Ms. Flemming said.

"Oh." The man blinked.

"Nice to meet you, sir." Dane looked at his feet and wished he could go eat his cakes behind one of the big plants or something. "This is a real nice room," he finally said. "I cleaned this room we're in now, lots of times!"

"I'm the university president," the man told him.

"That's nice. I guess you like that job. This is a really nice lunch you're serving."

"Well...it was catered. I didn't actually make all this food."

"I'm having a really good time so far," Dane assured him. "I mean, I thought I'd have to watch Discovery Channel or somethin' before I talked to people like you, but so far everyone's really nice."

Suddenly, Noel was at his shoulder, looking down at his plate. "Lots of cake there," he noted in a teasing voice, before giving Dane a smile, and Dane realized Noel was hurting from how they were apart. Hurting and trying to find a way to get close again.

"You can have one of mine," Dane offered, holding Noel's gaze.

"Your father is attending this luncheon, Noel," Ms. Flemming said. "Are you sure this is the best place to bring...your friend?" She nodded at Dane.

Noel's eyes flamed. "Yes, that's exactly why I brought Dane, Ms. Flemming, and just for your information, I gave instructions for all future funding my family offers the university go to me for approval."

"But...your father..."

"Is a figurehead," Noel said coldly. "And I think you had best remember that when you speak to me...or my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" the university president repeated. "You're dating...the janitor?"

"Well, technically I'm not a janitor anymore, sir, on account I got fired, and Noel and I can't date right now anyways."

"Why is that?" The older man was studying Dane as if fascinated.

"Oh, I'm in training now for a fight. No fooling around, you know? So I can't date with Noel till that's over, but I'm very much looking forward to when I can date him again, you know? A smart man like yourself probably knows how a man has needs, right? Anyway, Noel takes really good care of mine."

Ms. Flemming arched her brows at Noel and Dane. "Oh, look! Your father has arrived. I wonder what he'll think about your...guest, Noel."

Chapter Twenty-two

BJ

"How can you parade that illiterate brute around people you've known your entire life!" Arthur rasped.

He had gone to Noel as soon as he'd stalked into the university luncheon and had taken his arm. Dane had made to follow, protective, but Noel had shaken his head.

"Don't call him that!" Noel's voice was steely. "He might not have attended the best schools, but he's a good, hardworking man. And I'm proud he's mine."

Arthur wanted to reach out and shake Noel, as he had when he was a boy. Couldn't he see? "Noel, leave with me now. Please, it's not too late to put this lark behind you!"

"I don't want to. Dane makes me happy." Noel looked over his shoulder and realized Dane and most of the other people in the room were staring at them. Some also looked at Dane, seeing the "brute" his father had cursed.

Noel limped back to Dane, then pulled his head down and, conscious of all the eyes on them, kissed his lips.

Dane put his arm around Noel, seeing this wasn't easy for him.

The university president surprised Noel by reaching out to shake his hand. "Bring your boyfriend to any function. I'd be delighted to get to know Dane better."

"Thank you, sir," Noel said in a husky voice.

"You're sick!" Arthur hissed.

"Excuse me, sir," Dane said, taking on Arthur. "I lost someone who was like a father to me, and he didn't care about me bein' gay. I'm sorry you can't see how brave Noel is bein'. I hope one day you can."

* * * * *

Outside, Noel walked the university grounds in a daze.

Dane rubbed his back, aching for him. Noel had only known he was gay a short time. It seemed like it was hard for some men, though Dane had grown up knowing, and thanks to Charlie, it hadn't bothered him none. "Let's go to the Japanese gardens. I like lookin' at the fish there. Makes me feel like I'm part of things, even when the heron comes by and swallows some of 'em."

"I'm sorry he said those things about you."

"What he said doesn't matter. You matter, and you love me, don't you, Noel?"

Noel leaned his head against Dane's warm shoulder. "I'm trying, Dane. I fuck up sometimes."

"You just need a break."

Noel shook his head. "I didn't think it would hurt so much, how he disapproves of me."

Figuring there was nothing he could say, Dane guided Noel toward the gardens. He pulled him close since here on campus there were lots of students who had signs up about how it was cool to love a boy even if you were one yourself. "He's your father, so yeah, it hurts." Dane stroked Noel's cold hands. "I'm sorry he's mad at you over me. If I could be a girl for you, I swear I'd be one. Only I don't think he'd like me anyway. I'm dumb."

"I don't think I'd want you if you were a girl. Or maybe I would."

"That's 'cause you see me, the person, and my penis doesn't matter."

"I like your penis. I want to suck it."

Dane tripped over the curb. "Noel!"

Noel gave a shaky laugh. He bit Dane's ear gently. "Are there any secluded places in the park?"

"The teahouse, only it's closed up."

"Oh."

"I know where they keep the key, though."

Dane shyly led Noel up steps to the tiny cedar and bamboo teahouse in the corner of the gardens. Students were lying in the sunshine, sunbathing as they studied, and showed little interest in Dane and Noel as they sneaked inside.

Noel closed the door, and Dane lit one of the small kerosene lamps. He put it on the floor. "They got stuff in here to make real Japanese tea. You want we should do that?"

Noel pushed back his tangled blond hair. "That would be nice. I'm...unsettled."

"You're just in training to be your own person. Not easy telling your father who you are, I figure."

"No." Noel huffed, giving Dane a grateful look for his understanding. "So tea...?"

"I like the Japanese white pear!" Dane said.

"We'll have that."

Dane gathered the supplies. The beverage was made on a brazier, which he lit. He filled the iron pot with bits of raw leaves and placed it on the stand above the flame. "Now we wait awhile." Dane shimmied down to where Noel was watching. He leaned close and sneaked a kiss.

"It's like firecrackers goin' off when we kiss, isn't it?" Dane smiled, taking in Noel's more relaxed expression.

Noel leaned his head against Dane's. "Hold me...keep me safe?"

Patient with this new vulnerability, Dane pulled the smaller man into his muscled arms. He kissed Noel's forehead.

"I wish you could take those words away so they didn't hurt me," Noel breathed. "Can you do that?"

"No," Dane said.

"No, not even you can do that." Noel sighed.

"It's part of bein' on your own. Making your own choices, you know? It's more than not liking spinach and never buying it. It's...who you love. You love a boy, so you're gonna get hurt sometimes, and I'm real sorry about that. I meant what I said; if I could be a girlfriend for you, I would be."

Noel stroked Dane's hair off his forehead. "No, you're perfect as you are."

The tea had steeped and was ready. Dane dug out delicate celadon cups and served Noel before himself. Then they leaned against the wall, sipping, Dane rubbing Noel's leg, watching him, while Noel stared out the open screen door at the pond where koi swam.

Slowly, Noel's muscles loosened. They drank another cup of tea, and Noel leaned against Dane.

Dane ached for Noel's silent pain.

After a while, Noel fell asleep and so did Dane.

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When Noel woke, it was to discover the little park had closed for the night. It was lit only by the flames in stone lanterns that followed the gravel paths.

Noel blinked, hearing the gentle rush of the waterfall. He could smell cedar and tea and Dane's arms were still around him, comforting him.

"Are you awake?"

"Yeah...just thinking."

"What about?"

"You called me beautiful. No one's ever said that about me."

"You are." Noel pulled away. "I want to do something for you."

"Yeah? Like give me chocolates or something? Ooooooh, how about more of those cakes, Noel? You think there are any left?"

Noel smiled. "We'll sneak in there and check later, if you like."

Dane nodded, enthusiastic.

Noel kissed his boxer before deliberately reaching down and undoing Dane's belt. Dane's eyes widened. "Are you gonna spank me with that, Noel?"

Noel choked. "Oh, shit! No...but now I sort of want to."

Dane frowned as Noel undid his zipper and then dug into his boxers to pull his erection free. He was hard from sleeping with Noel, his big penis flexing.

"What are you going to do?"

"Blow you," Noel said. He pushed Dane's legs open and sat between them, and then he bowed down and touched Dane's hot flesh with a timid tongue.

"Noel!"

"You're beautiful," Noel said. "Do you know why I want to do this?"

Dane shook his head, gasping as Noel licked him from crown to stem. He dug his hands into his thighs.

"Because I called you stupid."

"I don't care none about that now, Noel—" Dane bit his lip, thrusting into Noel's mouth, trying not to be too eager, too rough, as he gave himself.

"I do. I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to say those things. I was just..." Noel looked sad, and Dane stroked his hair.

"You don't want me to face Narone."

Noel nodded. "You've remade me...my life, everything. Don't leave me alone, now I've found you."

"I won't do that, Noel," Dane said in reassurance.

Noel shook his head, wishing he could believe. Then, because he had no words, he adored his Dane again, taking him into his mouth, experimenting, running his tongue around the rim of Dane's cock and then toying with the slit. Dane shuddered, making pleading sounds. He didn't move, and Noel marveled that all this strength was his to manipulate.

"Are you my dirty boy?" Noel teased, escaping into their naughty play. "Can't wait for Daddy to suck it, can you?"

Dane's cheeks were hollow, his eyes heavy, his cheeks flagged with bright color. He read so easily Noel's need to give. To play. "Please, Daddy...please let me come!"

"Want to come in Daddy's mouth?" Noel licked Dane, teasing him before blowing on the wetness.

Noel sucked and Dane trembled, his balls hard as Noel caressed them. Noel felt them draw tighter and then Dane was thrusting up into Noel's mouth, sobbing –

"Please, Daddy!"

With his legs sprawled wantonly, Dane caught his breath as Noel licked his sensitive penis clean of his spill.

"What about you, Noel?"

"Can we finish in our bed? I want so much to make love there, make our loft belong to both of us. Our own bed, Dane."

"I'm supposed to be in training but..." Dane stroked Noel's back. "That's happy. I like happy. For a while, everything was sad."

* * * * *

Noel had his hand in Dane's back pocket. As they walked together, Dane's arm around him, he asked, "Feel good?"

Dane nodded. "I felt lousy this morning, but now I feel good. We're going to make love in our own bed!"

Noel grinned, looking much more relaxed from their time together in the sanctuary of the little teahouse. "I might not let you out of bed for a week, gorgeous," he teased.

"Promise?" Dane asked. "Only thing wrong with our bed is there ain't nothing for you to tie me up with."

Noel's eyes widened. "Oh!"

They reached the car and found Gilbert standing beside it, looking around, frantic. "Master Noel!"

"What is it, Gilbert?" Noel immediately tensed.

"I got a phone call from Mr. Trent. Your father broke into your apartment and vandalized it!"

"What?" Noel shook his head, disbelieving, while Dane gripped his hand. "Gilbert, take us home now!"

Chapter Twenty-three

Taking Care of His Boy

The drive back to Charlie's Gym seemed to take forever.

"What if your father hurt our fish, Noel?" Dane pressed his face against Noel's neck.

"Our fish? If I weren't already crazy about you, hearing you say that..." Noel kissed Dane passionately. "I'll kill him if he's hurt any of our friends."

"That won't bring them back," Dane said softly, thinking, as he looked out the window, that he could run faster to the loft on his own since they were stuck in traffic. But he had the idea that he should stay with Noel.

"No, but I want to hurt him if he's hurt us. Can't you understand that?" Noel pulled away, frustrated.

Dane shrugged. "No. I mean, I want to fight Narone, but if he died, Charlie would still be gone. I'd still ache for him every day. Nothing makes me feel better, except being with you or Sparrow or Mr. Trent. My friends in the gym make me feel better too. But Narone dyin'...that wouldn't take away the hurting."

"Charlie was a good man. My father...is twisted," Noel said bitterly.

"Twisted? But aren't you bein' like your father by wanting bad things, Noel?" Dane asked. He put a hand over Noel's. "Please don't be like him. I don't want you to be like that!"

Noel closed his eyes. "I'm trying," he whispered.

At Charlie's Gym, Gilbert double-parked. He didn't stay with the car, but went inside with Dane and Noel since he was also concerned about Mr. Trent and their pets.

The trio strode inside to find Mr. Trent standing in the center of the gym, telling his story to two police officers and an interested circle of boxers. Dane shoved through, making an easier route for Noel and Gilbert.

"Mr. Trent?"

The elderly man had a steak over one eye.

"Your eye!"

Mr. Trent laughed. "I was in a fight, Dane!" he crowed proudly. "I used my cane on that son of a bitch. He got me in the eye, but I got in a couple of good shots!"

Dane lifted the steak away gently and examined Mr. Trent's eye. "You're gonna have a shiner!"

"So will he!"

Noel's face was pale as the walls. "It was...my father?"

Mr. Trent's mouth softened. He nodded. "I'm sorry, son. He said he had your permission to visit...that he had a housewarming gift for you. I let him in, but when I heard him smashing things, I went back there right quick!"

"Goldie!"

Mr. Trent grabbed Dane's hands. "Settle down, Dane. I had your fishbowl in my kitchen to feed them this morning while the tanks are being set up, like you asked. Sparrow was with me too. Your pets are safe."

Dane swallowed tightly, relief filling his eyes.

Mr. Trent said, "I think you and Noel should stay in my apartment tonight. There's no need to go in there until someone can...clean up, surely?"

Noel's eyes narrowed. His hot blue gaze burned a path over to the industrial elevator that led to the lofts above.

Gilbert appeared with a chair from Dane's office and helped Mr. Trent sit down so he could finish his report to the police. The old man squeezed the servant's hand as they both watched Noel heading for the elevator with Dane following as inevitably as the moon follows the earth.

"Noel!"

"Stay here!"

"No, I'm your boyfriend. So we handle things together, you know? Good and bad." He reached out and tugged Noel's hand.

Noel's hand on his cane clenched, but he took a deep breath. "Okay, Dane."

Dane stepped over the shredded remains of pillows. In the kitchen, he could see the smashed plates and bowls Noel had let him pick out. They had happy faces on them.

The teddy bear that Dane had had since he was a baby sat on their leather couch, shredded. The bear's head was twisted almost off. He picked it up.

Noel watched him, his blue eyes like those in a scary painting that Dane had once seen of a warrior angel.

Dane trailed behind Noel into their bedroom. The fish tank was fine, but the leather tufted bed and sheets were ripped, the bedside lamps smashed. Dane's drawings that he'd shown to Noel had been torn up and scattered on the floor. Dane wrinkled his nose. "It's stinky. Do you think the bathroom got backed up, Noel? That used to happen in my old apartment sometimes."

"My father..." Noel swallowed. "He urinated on our bed, Dane."

"He just needs some time, Dane," Mr. Trent said, rubbing Dane's back soothingly.

Dane was down in the gym. The police had left after taking Mr. Trent's complaint against Arthur, and Noel was upstairs in their loft sorting through things with Gilbert's silent help.

Dane felt useless up there, so he was hitting one of the heavy bags, working through his feelings, sorting them out like they were different paint colors.

"Just things..." he said. "No one was really hurt."

Mr. Trent looked down at his feet. "I'm sorry he...defiled your bed, lad."

Dane's big fists dropped. He wiped his sweaty face. "I don't know how to make that go away. For Noel and me. I been fightin' all my life. Been beat down. Had my bones broken. But...I don't know how to fight this. Is Noel gonna think I'm...I'm someone that you piss on, because his father thinks so?" He struck the bag. "Well, I ain't! I'm not educated, like Noel." *Bang!* "I know that, but I'm not..." *BANG!* "Someone you just piss on!" *BANG! BANG!* "I'm a man!"

Dane's head fell back as he panted. "I am a man," Dane whispered.

* * * * *

Noel watched Gilbert drag out another large garbage bag and lean it against the door. "Excuse me, Master Noel?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sure it's occurred to you that the break-in into Dane's apartment and other things...might bear looking at again in light of your father's behavior today. In fact, that boxer who challenged Dane, I believe he was at the house with your father when I went to retrieve your things." Gilbert looked like he might continue but then shook his head, lips pressed together.

"I've...wondered." Noel toyed with the broken teddy bear. "Don't tell Dane. Please. What if he can't forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" Gilbert frowned. "You aren't your father. You aren't responsible for his actions."

Noel couldn't bring himself to toss out Dane's bear with the other garbage. He decided to see if there was a place that might repair toys. "What if I am? What if it's too late for me? I get so angry sometimes, Gilbert. I hit Dane. I called him stupid. When I look around our loft, it's like I'm seeing part of myself in this destruction. How am I different from my father?"

Gilbert sighed. "That's something you're going to have to deal with on your own, sir. But...I don't think you are like your father. He never acknowledged his male lovers. In our case, he ended it and said we must never speak of it again."

Noel's eyes sauced. "You and...my father?"

"For a while. It was after your accident. There'd been someone else. Someone he really loved, I think. A man who worked with his hands. He built the gazebo in your father's garden and did jobs around the house."

Noel sat down on the destroyed couch. "My father's...gay?"

The older man nodded. "Strictly in secret since Arthur always saw it as a 'lark.' When we were together, it was lord of the manor and his servant, but I was very attracted to him," Gilbert admitted. "Then one day he told me he was assigning me to be your driver rather than his, and if I ever spoke of what had happened between us, I'd be fired. I was fond of you. You were hurting so much and so brave. I wanted to stay, so I did as he ordered."

"I can't..." Noel shook his head. "I can't understand how he could do that. If he loved this other man, why aren't they together?"

Gilbert smiled thinly. "He told me once that Tomas couldn't read."

* * * * *

"Come with me?" Noel asked Dane.

Dane had just gotten out of the shower. Oblivious to the other boxers, he dropped his towel and bent over to find some fresh clothing. Noel saw a couple of men glance at Dane, so Noel shifted to block their view of his lover's nudity. "Maybe you should shower upstairs in our apartment?" he suggested mildly, trying not to growl at the man who'd been eying Dane's bent-over tush. Dane wasn't the only gay boxer, it seemed.

"If you want," Dane said, easy. He dressed and followed Noel from the gym to where Gilbert was waiting with the car. Dane hesitated, and Noel knew he was flashing back to the earlier tense drive back to the gym and the destruction in their loft.

"Secret mission," he hinted, trying to be extra tender and make up for his rage earlier.

"Yeah? Where were we going?"

"It wouldn't be a secret if I told you, now would it?" Noel smiled.

* * * * *

Dane and Noel went to a metalworking shop in the artisan's market. There were handmade metal bed frames on the polished concrete floor. Dane made a beeline for a king-size one that was covered in wrought-iron leaves and branches and traced it with wondering hands. "Look, Noel! It's like living inside a forest!"

The old man who owned the shop smiled over Dane's delight. "Can I help you?"

"We need a new bed," Noel said. "We'll take the one Dane found."

"That's a special bed," the man nodded.

"Can you arrange for a mattress as well?"

The man looked a bit surprised by Noel's haste, but he took his gold card easily enough.

Meanwhile, Dane was lying on the bed, looking up at twisted metal foliage. "You can tie me up easy in this bed, Noel," he said, smiling.

Dane dragged them into a custom paint shop next.

"But we don't need to repaint, love," Noel told him.

"I was thinking...I want to do a mural, you know? I mean, now it's ours and we can have happy things on our walls. I want to paint Charlie by our breakfast table, so he's there every day for me like always."

Noel studied Dane's earnest face as he picked up different colors, his big hands seeming to know what they needed as he rubbed various brushes against his wrist or the palm of his hand. For some reason, seeing him do that aroused Noel.

"Okay," he said. He'd always thought walls should be one color. He'd had the walls in their loft painted with the latest designer colors...but now their home had been violated, and he knew Dane felt the same aching pain he did and wanted to find a way to mend it somehow.

They needed to remake their home together.

Dane smiled and kissed him on the lips.

Noel led Dane into a sex shop. He was gripping Dane's hand for comfort because of what he'd come to find.

"I am Master Nathan. How may I help you?" a tall brunet asked. There was a short, redheaded young man stacking supplies, who gave Noel and Dane a shy glance before his eyes fell and he went back to work. Noel saw he was wearing a discreet silver collar.

"I want a few things for..." Noel bit his lip, not sure he could do this, expose himself to a stranger, but he wanted so much to please Dane. "I'm slightly disabled. My leg? And I want to please my boyfriend. I did some research, but I hoped you could suggest some things which might act to stimulate him before we, um..."

Master Nathan nodded, smiling. "You're among friends here. My boy Michael is wearing something now that might work for you." He lifted a remote and showed it to them. "This controls a vibrating dildo I use for Michael sometimes. It gently stimulates him, enhancing our encounters."

Dane looked over at Michael. "You've got something up your ass?" he asked, wide-eyed.

Michael gave Dane a calm look and then a mischievous one at Master Nathan. "Yep."

Noel took the plastic package and read the instructions. "I'll need a belt so he can wear it comfortably. Something...not tacky. Something soft for his skin. Will it really make up for my not being able to..." He cleared his throat.

"It will extend your play," Nathan affirmed. "He's beautiful, your boy."

"Thank you," Noel and Dane said at the same time.

Dane was looking around at the gear. He gave the posture correctional collar and spreader bar an anxious look and backed away. Noel followed, smiling. He took Dane's hand, feeling the need to touch, to mate. "We don't need that," he said, giving his Dane a gentle kiss.

Instead, they bought scented candles and oils in lemon, sandalwood, and summer roses, which Dane liked. There was also a selection of loose cut-stone anklets and collars. Dane liked the rose quartz. Noel liked the amethyst.

"Rose quartz is the heart stone," Michael explained. "I'm not surprised you're drawn to that one. It's love, passion, openness. A lot of subs like rose quartz."

"You make these up?" Noel asked.

"Yeah, I like working with stones. You like the amethyst? That's the higher self, intellect, but it also calms."

"I'd like something for both of us...mixing those two stones." Noel's hand squeezed Dane's.

"I make a mix I call Harmony. It blends the physical with the intellectual. Like the big rocks they put in a Japanese water garden? Water is yin, and the rocks are yang. Having both gives harmony."

* * * * *

Gilbert drove them to the beach, and in the men's there, Noel used the changing room to experiment with the toys he'd bought for Dane. As Dane watched, Noel stretched him with three fingers moving gently inside him as Dane's lips parted.

"Okay?" asked Noel, nervous. "I can't... Not as long as I wish I could," he finished, shamed.

"You do me fine," whispered Dane, kissing him. Noel had fingers up his ass and his other hand wrapped around Dane's cock. "Noel?"

"Not yet, sweetheart. I want you spread out and begging on our new bed. Don't you want to be that way for your daddy?"

Dane licked his lips, nodding.

Touching Dane's hair, Noel said, "We can go to a hotel room tonight, if you aren't ready to go home."

Dane frowned. "But what about our new bed? Aren't you gonna tie me up, Noel? Since I have to start training tomorrow, I can't let you do that for a while, and I really want you should do that to me."

"You don't feel bad anymore because of what my father did?"

"No, just horny," Dane said, stroking himself.

Noel lubed up the dildo and then carefully inserted it. He hooked it up to the soft belt he'd bought and bent over to give Dane's hip a tender kiss as he snapped the belt closed.

"How do you feel?"

"Full of plastic cock," Dane said.

Noel pulled out the remote and set it on the gentlest of settings.

Dane threw his head back, his nipples tightening, his body an arch of trembling arousal. "Noel!"

Smug, Noel gently helped Dane replace his clothing. He pulled him close and whispered, "What does it feel like now?"

Dane rubbed his groin against Noel's hip. "Daddy, please!"

Chapter Twenty-four

Amethyst and Rose Quartz

"How are you feeling?" Noel asked Dane.

They'd gotten word from Mr. Trent that the new metal bed and mattress had arrived. The cleaners had gone through the apartment, so they could go home, and yet, still Noel was tense. Could he let go enough to make love to Dane there? Worrying that he couldn't perform made sweat coat the back of his neck.

Now Noel studied his lover, who was lying back, sweat beading his forehead.

"Like I need to get fucked. Bad."

"Jesus!" Noel rubbed his hardness against Dane's leg. "Dane, the way you always want something up your ass!"

Dane smiled, his nipples tight buds under his T-shirt that Noel longed to bite and torment. "I want to feel full of you, not this thing."

The window between Gilbert in the driver's seat and Dane and Noel in the back rose slowly. Startled, Noel glanced up and met Gilbert's gaze. Saw the wicked sparkle in his eyes. He blushed, recognizing the wordless suggestion Gilbert was making.

"Do you want me to fuck you now?" Noel asked.

"Yeah, but...we're in the car."

"Gilbert closed the window. He can't see or hear us, and the windows are smoked. I've never done it in a car...or, well, really anywhere except those times with you...but I want you so much! You're so beautiful like this." Noel nipped Dane's straining neck and cupped the hard-on under Dane's jeans.

Dane groaned, pushing his erection deeper into Noel's touch. "Please, Noel."

Noel unzipped Dane and saw his cock was wet-tipped, a deep color, and heavy with thick veins. He gently traced the head, and Dane gasped, throwing his head back. So needy. So ready to be fucked.

Noel yanked down Dane's jeans to his ankles and shifted him around. He unclipped the little belt and reached between Dane's ass cheeks to take out the dildo. He forgot he'd left it on, so as he fumbled to get a grip, his movements pushed it deeper. Dane gave a choked cry and pushed his bottom higher. "Need it. Need it now, Daddy!"

Noel couldn't resist tormenting Dane. "What a hot slut you are. All ready for Daddy, baby?" He pushed the dildo in deeper. "That's right, fuck it back. Daddy's little whore. Always want something up there, don't you?" He nipped Dane's neck while pushing the dildo in and out as Dane whimpered.

"Please, Noel. Please, Daddy!" Dane was undulating, straining to take the fake phallus deeper.

"It's okay...I have lube. Somewhere." Noel tossed around some packages with his free hand, spilling art supplies and crystals and oils until he found the tube he'd bought. Pulling out the dildo, he was mesmerized by the way Dane kept fucking it back, needing sensation. Dane's balls were drawn up tight. Noel grazed them gently, and Dane gave a yelp.

"Want cock, gorgeous?"

Dane nodded, his lips trembling, obviously on fire for Noel.

"Open your legs for Daddy, and spread your ass cheeks to make room for Daddy's cock," Noel instructed, loving the dirty talk between them.

Noel unzipped himself and pushed his jeans down before preparing himself. He pushed Dane against the passenger window. Dane had his legs spread and his hands pulling himself open, offering the hot, needy circle for Noel to plunge into. Noel slid home into warmth, ready for his possession. "Oh, shit, Dane!"

Dane fucked him back, taking as much as he could, groaning need. "Please, Noel, please, I need it so bad!"

Noel began to fuck his lover's hot, slutty opening, kissing the side of his face and neck. "My beautiful David. That's it, take it. Take it all. Daddy likes when you fuck him back."

He slapped Dane's ass cheek sharply and watched how Dane, his eyes half-closed, bit his lip as he worked to bring himself off on Noel's cock.

"I'm gonna smack you again, and when I do, you'll come, do you hear me, Dane? You'll come all over Daddy's hand." He took Dane's penis and gave it a firm squeeze, which made Dane quiver and groan.

"Yes, Noel. Yes, Daddy...please?" His face flushed, Dane turned his head and licked his red lips.

Noel smacked him hard and gave Dane's cock another firm tug. Dane pulsed thick cum over Noel's hand and the passenger door.

The sight of all that beauty, unleashed at his command, set Noel off. He bit the side of Dane's neck hard, knowing he was marking him. Knowing that the next day when Dane started training, he'd be wearing a visible bruise, a hickey on his neck. Knowing the other men would know that Noel had marked him.

He loved the way Dane wanted to be filled. "Love doing this to you. Love—" Noel cut himself off as he groaned and worked the last of his passion into Dane while holding on to warm skin and big bones, the smell and feel of what was his.

Noel used his T-shirt to clean off Dane and smiled at him as he groaned, at his legs sprawled open, at his body, the picture of debauchery. "I did this to you," Noel said.

"Yeah, I loved it. I love you," Dane said. His brown eyes were fixed on Noel with that hopeful puppy look, the look that asked Noel to say those words back.

Noel lowered his gaze and used the T-shirt gently, loving to see the big body tremble in aftershocks. "It was good, wasn't it? Using that thing, it made you wild for it."

"You're so smart, Noel." Dane stroked the back of his hand, already flirting with him. "You know how to take good care of me."

Gilbert brought them home, and Noel climbed out of the car with an aching leg but a body relaxed from some very satisfying sex. He avoided Gilbert's knowing gaze as he and Dane headed into Charlie's Gym. Dane took his hand, smiled at him, and carried most of their purchases.

For the first time, Noel felt as much a man as any boxer in Charlie's gym.

He'd made Dane wild for it, and then he'd given it to him.

He and Dane didn't have much time to take in the newly cleaned loft; they both headed to the bed and collapsed on it. Noel breathed in the new-sheet smell, and then he was out like a light, Dane curled around him from behind, his body happily spooning Noel's slighter one.

* * * * *

Noel woke up alone, frowning. He squinted but saw no sign of his sexy boxer. He got up and went to find Dane. He hoped he was still in the loft.

He found him sitting on the floor, cross-legged, painting his mural. He was naked, covered only in bright paint splatters.

Noel realized that he too was naked and shrugged. He never used to walk around this way at home, and because of his leg, he'd never imagined doing it. But he was with Dane, and Dane thought his leg was beautiful.

He sat down beside him and pushed Dane's hair away from his face, watching as soft brown eyes looked into his and smiled.

"Hi," Dane said. "I'm painting."

"I see that. It's late, sweet."

"I couldn't wait to put Charlie into our new home." Dane dipped his brush and traced a pencil line. He was using bold color.

"As long as you get your rest now you're in training."

Dane put the brush down. "I thought you didn't want me to fight Narone?"

"I don't. Actually, I'd like to shoot him," Noel said, a thread of his rage in his voice. "For what he did to Charlie and for what he might do to you, but...you won't let me be the man who could do that." Noel played with some of the brushes Dane had been using.

Dane studied him, and Noel knew he saw exactly who Noel was. The buried warrior.

"So why do you care about my training now?" Dane asked, avoiding the subject of what they both knew Noel was capable of.

"Because I don't want you to get hurt. Because I want to hurt him, but you won't let me, so I want you to hurt him." Noel looked up and seared Dane with his gaze. "I want you to win, Dane!"

Dane frowned. "I'm not sure I can win. I mean...I'm just a regular fighter, and he's the best, you know?"

Noel paused, not knowing how to address Dane's doubts, especially in light of how he'd cursed Dane previously and told him he had no chance. Then he saw the glitter of stones in one of the open bags beside Dane, and he pulled out the anklets Michael had made for them. One was rose quartz with a little heart-shaped geode of amethyst, and the other was a tumbled amethyst ring with a smooth rose quartz heart.

Noel put the one that was primarily amethyst around Dane's ankle. "I thought that one was yours?" Dane asked.

"It was, but...maybe if you wear it, you'll feel how I believe in you? Dane...you changed me. I was an angry man like my father, but you made me see you. You were a man I'd been taught to look down on, a janitor, but you were the only person who saw I was more than my leg. That I could be a lover, not just a cripple."

Noel put the anklet made of rose quartz on his own ankle. "And I need to be reminded of how I need to be more gentle, so I'm going to wear yours."

"It's like we're two colors, you know?" Dane commented softly. "Like when I paint, I mix the colors up to make somethin' new. We're two colors getting mixed in each other."

Chapter Twenty-five

The Stuff Inside

On the floor in front of Dane's budding mural of Charlie, Noel tangled with Dane, felt Dane's cock rubbing against his own, and knew that soon he'd be on top of Dane on the bare floor, thrusting inside him while Dane put his ankles on Noel's shoulders.

Dane fingered his anklet. "I don't know how it will go down in the ring with Narone. You go in there with the stuff inside, all the trainin', and that's all you got," he admitted softly. "And...I'm scared, but I just got to do this anyway."

Noel closed his eyes, wrapped in Dane's warm arms. "You've got the stuff to face him, I know you do. I'm scared too." Noel mated his hand with Dane's paint-stained one, holding his gaze. "But I'm in training not to be," he said, using one of Dane's favorite expressions.

Dane's face lightened, and he leaned his forehead against Noel's.

"Okay," he said.

Outside the bedroom he shared with Noel, Dane, lying on the couch, picked up his teddy bear, which Noel had stitched together himself with black thread. Noel had wanted to take Bear to a proper doll-repair shop, but Dane liked that Noel had taken the time to repair his teddy bear. Noel had washed him and even ironed his ears flat.

"I think you do love me, Noel," Dane said. "Yeah, I think you do."

Cuddling Bear, he remembered his past, before he met up with Charlie and started working and feeling better about himself. Being in school but unable to concentrate on the lessons because they didn't capture his imagination, unable to be just like the other kids. Instead, he spent a lot of his time drawing figures, sketching things he saw around him.

"I dunno the answer," he had mumbled, when asked a question in class.

"Did you even pay attention?" his teacher had prodded.

"I did, I promise!"

"I think you better go see Mr. Spade again, Dane. Clearly, it's a waste of time having you in here at all. You've failed all your tests, and I'm confident you'll keep on failing."

Shaking off the memory, Dane stuck his head around the aquarium wall and looked at his Noel, sleeping, the covers kicked off. He liked looking at Noel's nude body. His pale back, the bumps of his spine, the way he buried his head in his pillow, his hand resting where Dane would be sleeping if he weren't in training.

He felt bad for ogling Noel, seeing how they couldn't date right now. Dane had a boner just looking at him and imagined waking him up and Noel pushing him on his back and making Dane grab his ankles so he could go inside.

Dane sneaked closer and kissed Noel's bare ass. "Sunny-side up," he murmured, feeling lonely. He pulled the blankets over Noel, so he'd sleep warm. "I very much miss sleepin' with you," he continued in a whisper. "I wish you weren't so worried, so you'd be happy and laugh some more, you know?"

"Did you have a bad dream?" Noel croaked, awake now.

Dane blinked. "No. Just...remembering some stuff that happened when I was a kid in school."

Noel sat up, rubbing his face, which sported fine stubble.

Dane longed to feel it rough his skin in a passionate kiss.

"You're worried about failing with Narone, aren't you?"

Dane nodded. "I have to hold my own with him, you know? Hold my ground."

Noel played with the blanket. "I felt like a failure too."

"Yeah, you had trouble in school?"

"My...leg. I used to be ridiculed in school because I couldn't do things like the other kids. My father arranged for private tutoring when my grades went down, but he told me that I should ignore the things said about me. That I was weak."

"You aren't weak for feelin' bad, Noel."

"Neither are you."

Dane looked at his hands, avoiding Noel's concerned gaze. "You don't say you love me when I tell you I love you. I know I said I'd be happy with whatever you give me, but...I really want you to say it back to me."

Noel sighed. "I want to say it, Dane, but there are things that get in the way of my words. The truth is, I haven't been telling you a lot of things."

"You keeping something from me?"

Noel paused, his brow wrinkled. "Yes...but not because I don't think you're smart, Dane."

"If you tell me, maybe I can make it better."

Noel shook his head. "No, this is something even you can't make better."

Dane saw that Noel's fingers were shaking. He felt his own gut twist.

"Noel, tell me!"

"I'm afraid I'll lose you by telling you," Noel confessed. "I don't think my father just wrecked our loft. I think he might have done worse. I think he paid Narone to fight you because he wanted you out of my life." Noel shook his head as Dane made to speak. "Let me finish. Dane, there are too many bad things in your life lately: Goldie's bowl, you losing your job...Charlie. And now I'm certain that Narone only wants to fight you so he can hurt you – badly! – and oh, God, I'm so scared he will!"

"You think your father did all that?" Dane looked away, mulling it over. Noel ached to reach out and touch him. "It's 'cause he thinks I'm not good enough, isn't it? Because I'm a loser. A janitor. Not any kind of fighter, even."

"Dane...I'm afraid you'll see me as my father's son."

"No."

"I am! I've done things, said things to you –"

"You didn't mean 'em. That was just the bad stuff inside you, you got from living with your father. But you're with me now. And Goldie, Blackie, and Sparrow. That dark stuff will drain away, like me washing black paint from my hands in the kitchen sink, you know? You just need time, I figure."

"I have to go see him and tell him to stop harassing you. That I won't leave you. Maybe he'll call the fight off if I do."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

Noel shook his head as Dane climbed off the bed. "You're going for your... What do you call it?"

"Roadwork. Um, running, yeah," Dane said. "Then I got to work out with the heavy bag and the fast bag and jump rope, and I'm gonna spar with someone later. But Jackson says I have to be sharp to spar, so I might do that before the other stuff."

Noel nodded, but then he burst out, "You won't...leave me, will you, Dane? Because I'm like him? Because I find it hard to say...those words you want to hear?"

Dane cocked his head. "I can wait till they come easy. You're just in training to say 'I love you,' but you'll get there. You need to do your own roadwork. And you aren't like your father. Know how I know that? You're livin' here with me, a janitor. Would your father do that?"

The streetlights were still on when Dane walked outside Charlie's Gym. Leaning against the old brick building, he stretched his back and his calves and thighs. He shook his hands, which he'd wrapped out of habit.

Then he stepped into the middle of the alley and began his run.

He ran past the fruit truck delivering fresh stuff to the local market. Past the library. Past the cop shop. Down through alleys and over the railroad tracks. Past a metalworking shop and butcher's. Past a tiny art shop where he couldn't help but slow down to look at the supplies.

His breath was whistling in and out of his lungs painfully. His bruised ribs hurt, and his bad eye burned.

He forced himself to turn away from the art display and run on.

He cut around the church to Charlie's grave. The sun was coming up. The flowers he'd left before were brown and gold, but Dane thought they were still kind of pretty – just different colors.

"Hey, Charlie. I had to come by, 'cause you know I'm training now, only this is the first time I'm not training with you telling me what I should do, you know? I got to try to remember stuff. I wish you were still around. 'Cept if you were, I wouldn't be fightin', I guess." Dane's chest was heaving. He'd done his roadwork, all the way, and now he hurt.

"I don't have too long before I got to face this guy, Narone, and you know, I think I know now what I want to do with my life. I didn't know before with all the stuff happening at once, but now things feel clearer.

"I want to go to art school and maybe do things like paint murals and stuff. I want to be in Noel's bed so he'll fuck me all the time." Dane rubbed his sore ribs and bent down and kissed Charlie's marker. "Help me stand up. Help me hold my own. I want to show Noel and his father and Narone that I'm not a loser just because I'm not smart. I'm not afraid of hurtin', but I need to be standing when the bell rings on the last round, you know? Then, I dunno, maybe Noel can say he loves me back if I stand up, you know? And I'll know that even though you got killed, you're okay with things 'cause I did like you taught me."

* * * * *

Gilbert was making breakfast, and the smell was great, though Dane didn't feel hungry, just shaky and sort of sick.

"Heart-shaped pancakes, Dane?" Gilbert asked.

Dane nodded, suddenly more enthusiastic. It was nice Gilbert and Mr. Trent liked to spoil him. No one else ever got offered the heart-shaped pancakes!

Gilbert arrived with the first two. They had $D + N$ in the middle in paler dough. "How'd you do that, Gilbert?" He grinned as he put maple syrup on the pancakes.

"Trade secret." Gilbert winked.

Noel stumbled in, looking groggy since he wasn't a morning person, but he went straight to Dane and hugged him from behind while closing his eyes and holding him. Dane covered his hand and reached up to give him a maple syrup smack on the lips.

"Want some heart-shaped pancakes? They might make you feel better since you're gonna go see your father."

Gilbert gave Noel a sharp look. "I'll drive you, Master Noel."

"Thanks, Gilbert," Noel said, with gratefulness in his eyes for Gilbert's support.

Dane rubbed Noel's hand. "I know you gotta do this, like I have to face Narone. Show your father who you are and the stuff you got inside you."

Noel dressed carefully in his best suit. He'd called his father's secretary and asked to meet him at the university.

He adjusted his silver Armani tie and, reaching for his cane, remembered Dane assuring him that if he worked hard enough, he might be able to strengthen his leg with some of the exercises that fighters used, and possibly, he wouldn't need to use it as often. But for now, Noel needed it.

He opened the loft door and found Gilbert waiting outside, formally dressed in his chauffeur's attire, which Noel didn't insist he wear.

"Sir."

"Gilbert... Thank you for..." Noel rubbed his hand over his good leg nervously since opening up was still difficult. But Dane had said it would be easier with time. All he had to do was his roadwork. "I wasn't always a good person, I know."

"You could be a brat," Gilbert admitted, a rare smile carving through the sad lines of his face. "But your father is a difficult man."

"You...still love him, don't you?" Noel asked.

Gilbert nodded. "I never would have slept with him if I didn't...or let him treat me the way he did."

"I'm so sorry. He's not worthy of you!"

"He had another side. Once. I kept looking for it for years until I finally realized it was gone, that he had come to despise himself for being queer. That's when I knew I had to move out with you," Gilbert said. He pushed the button to the elevator, summoning it. "The man I gave myself to would never hire someone to hurt another. And, Noel, I can't leave it. I've decided to follow Mr. Trent's example and go to the police with what I know – that Narone and your father may have conspired, and it led to Charlie's death. I hope...you understand." He took a deep breath and studied Noel.

Noel said, "He'll never forgive you, never take you back."

Gilbert swallowed. "You matter more."

Noel got into the elevator with Gilbert. He gripped his cane, but with his free hand reached out to the other man and squeezed his arm. "This is...hard, for both of us. Thank you."

Gilbert's eyes widened. "For what, sir?"

Noel's eyes were moist. "For helping make me a man who wouldn't turn his back on love, on Dane."

"Dane is right, you have to face him. You have to tell him what he's done is wrong."

"I know. I feel like...if Dane and I don't face these things, we won't be able to be together, somehow." Noel shook his head. "I know that's not true, not really, but it feels that way."

"Nothing worth fighting for comes easy, Master Noel. Dane has his fight...and you have yours."

* * * * *

"Father."

"Noel." Arthur stood. He looked nervous, which surprised Noel. Always before he had seemed angry or confident...or bullying. Arthur saw Gilbert was within earshot. "Get back to the car!" he barked at the servant.

"Don't speak to him like that!"

"He's just a servant, Noel."

"He was your lover!"

Arthur glared at Gilbert. "You told him?"

"Gilbert works for me now, and he's my friend."

"He was nothing but an easy fuck."

Gilbert turned to walk away, face resigned, but Noel had seen the hurt in his eyes.

"I was afraid I'd be like you," Noel said. "That the anger inside me and the way I like to dominate my own lover meant that I'd end up hurting him."

"Well, I'm glad you are topping that brute. I was afraid you were so soft you were letting him do you!"

Noel gripped his cane, wanting to smash his father with it like he had the man who had tried to use Dane. "I would never treat Dane the way you treated Gilbert...or Tomas."

Arthur looked shaken. "You...know about Tomas?"

Noel nodded. "If you loved him, how could you send him away?"

Arthur flinched. "I didn't! He couldn't accept that I was a married man with a son, and what we had wasn't...right. He felt bad that we sneaked behind your mother's back. He didn't want to hurt her or you, so he..."

"He left you."

"The night of the car accident I got word he'd been killed on a construction job. I'd always had someone watching him. I wrote him, asking him to come back to me. I'd have bought him a house, set him up."

"Why didn't you just leave my mother?"

"The...money. Everything was hers. I was good to her and good to you. Tomas wouldn't settle for being my bit on the side."

"He sounds like he was a good man, so I'm sorry for you that you lost him."

Arthur whispered, "He couldn't read. He was nothing but a servant...but he was beautiful. I could watch him for hours. When I heard he'd died..."

Noel swallowed, shocked to feel pity under all the rage. He'd wanted to hurt his father. He was still sickened by the things he'd done.

"Just tell me one thing. Did you have anything to do with Charlie's death?"

Arthur shook his head. "I wanted him threatened but not killed. Narone did that. I'm...sorry, Noel. I just didn't want your life ruined the same way mine was. Loving another man was a mistake. It only brought me pain. I wanted better for you."

"Don't you see? It wasn't loving Tomas that twisted your life, but the way you turned away from him. The way you turned away from Gilbert!"

"Gilbert..." Arthur looked over at the chauffeur. "He probably hates me now, like you do."

Noel's eyes widened. "You love him!"

Arthur shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I feel. It's over between us."

"One day I hope you'll apologize to him, even if you turned your back on something good."

Arthur's brief softness was gone. "It was never good, it was wrong, and I finally put it behind me!"

Seeing there was no point in talking about Gilbert further, Noel returned to the heart of the matter. "You did terrible things to Dane, but I believe you when you say you didn't mean for Charlie to die. Only, if you'd killed Goldie, I'd never have forgiven you."

"Goldie?"

"His goldfish."

"Oh."

"You need help. Therapy. What you did to our loft. Our bed!" A thread of rage sparked through Noel's tone.

Arthur looked away. "I'm...sorry. You know I've always struggled with how angry I became... Please don't cut me from your life."

"Will you call off the fight? I'm begging you, don't make Dane face that killer!"

"I've tried to talk to Narone, but he says he has to face Dane now. If he backs down, he'll be seen as a coward."

"If he hurts Dane, I'll never forgive you, never speak to you again," Noel vowed, tears in his eyes.

"I'm...sorry. It's hard for me to say that to anyone."

"I don't think I can see you for a while. Not after what you did. And I don't trust you with my Dane. He's not a brute. He's...wonderful."

"I can't help but feel he's not good enough for my son."

Noel sighed, watching Arthur walk away. Gilbert put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Under all that hate, I can't help but wonder if he still loves you," Noel said. "What a waste."

Gilbert nodded. "He needs more than I can give him. He needs professional help. And..." Gilbert's jaw tightened. "He needs to atone if he's done something wrong."

"Charlie wasn't Dane's real father, and yet he made Dane who he is," Noel told Gilbert. "And...I think the good that I saw every day in you is why I didn't become a totally selfish brat. You were the father of my heart, Gilbert."

* * * * *

Back at Charlie's Gym, Dane stood with his hands clenched at his sides as one of the trainers hit his torso over and over with a gloved fist. He saw Noel arrive. "Stop till he goes upstairs, okay, Ralph? He gets upset over stuff like this," Dane said. His lips were compressed from the pain of absorbing the blows.

Noel strode over, his eyes burning with anger and pain as he took in Dane's sweat-soaked condition. "He was hurting you!"

"Yeah, it's part of bein' a boxer, Noel. I have to be able to take a punch and keep goin'. Ignore the pain, you know?"

"You'll be black-and-blue!"

"Noel..." Dane pulled him away from the other boxers so he could talk to him. "I'm gonna get hurt in this fight."

"No!"

"I know it. And it's okay. I just want to go the distance. Hold my ground and show Narone and everyone else I got the stuff. Show them I know what he did to Charlie, and I'm standing up for him."

"I can't..." Noel swallowed. "This is just so hard! How can you ask me to watch you be hurt?"

"I want you to be proud of me. I know you don't like what I do, but if I stand up, you'll see I'm a man. Maybe...even tell me you love me and stuff," Dane said, his gaze falling away from Noel's.

"Oh, Dane, you big lunk!" Noel pulled Dane's head down and kissed him to take away the sting of his words. He rubbed a gentle hand over the muscled torso he knew was covered in bruising. "I love you now! You don't need to get beaten up to earn that!"

Chapter Twenty-six

Your Song

Dane put down his gloves. His right side was still giving him trouble, but he'd run out of time. The fight was coming up soon.

His trainer, Jackson, rubbed his short black curls and nodded approvingly, stopwatch in hand. "Not bad at all, sugar! Lookin' good. I think you'll smoke that puppy!"

"Nah, you're just bein' nice, Jackson!" Dane put a friendly arm around the short African American, who still looked and sounded so much like Charlie to Dane that it was like some part of him was here, helping Dane out with both the gym and his upcoming challenge. It had hurt at first, a reminder that Charlie was gone, but this was how Charlie had wanted it, and Dane was grateful for Jackson's time and support.

"I think it'll be a righteous fight, is what I think, kid. Narone's a bastard. I want to see you knock him to his knees for what he done to Charlie!"

The heavy metal door creaked open, and Noel hesitantly walked into the gym.

"Yo! It's my Noel!" Dane bellowed, loudly enough that activity stopped and there was some good-natured snickering.

"Boy, you got it bad," Jackson teased. "Just remember, no...whatever it is you-boys-do-that-I-so-don't-want-to-think-about till after the match, or I'll kick your ass!"

"I swear I won't...only it's hard. I'm really horny, Jackson!" Dane took off his headgear, and Jackson helped him with his gloves.

Noel had been gone so often while he was training that he'd been missing him. When he came home from his run, Noel had already left, and when he fell asleep early, he didn't hear Noel come to bed.

Dane studied him as hungrily as Sparrow asking for a dog biscuit. He liked being able to look into his eyes without the glasses. Best thing he ever did, winning that fight so nothing hid Noel's beautiful blue eyes.

"Hi," Noel said.

"Hey. You're looking really fine today, you know that? I could almost eat you up, you look so fine!"

Noel blushed, looking around self-consciously.

"Noel don't like that I say boyfriend things to him in public, but I can't help myself," Dane told Jackson. "I'm so proud he wants me and I'm his, you know?"

Noel reached for Dane's hand. "I need to talk to you," he said, looking subdued.

"Okay. Sounds serious."

"In your office."

"Moving out! You're leaving me?"

Noel was across the room, arms wrapped around himself. "No," he said. "It's...this fight. I can't be here while you get ready for it."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry. I've tried, but watching you train...it's so brutal. I keep worrying you're going to be truly hurt. I'm angry all the time lately, Dane. I've been seeing a therapist, but it's not enough. What if my fears spill over onto you and get you seriously hurt? I'm so scared that's going to happen. Do you understand?"

Dane's big shoulders slumped. "Yeah, if you can't be with me..."

"It's not that."

"Yeah."

"Don't look at me like that. If my fears got you hurt, I'd never forgive myself!" Noel covered his eyes.

Dane sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked at Noel and took one step and another and then Noel was in his arms. "*Shhhh*."

"Don't get hurt." Noel buried his face against Dane's shoulder.

"Will you come to my fight?" Dane begged softly.

"Yes, I'll be there, only...I might stay in the dressing room."

Dane felt his spirits sink further.

"You understand, right?" Noel gave Dane a pleading look.

Dane made himself nod. "It's A-okay. I get it. You don't want to see me fight. No problem, 'cause they're gonna put it on the TV, so you can just...you know, record it. If you want."

Noel looked away. "I'd better go upstairs and finish packing."

"Okay," Dane said.

"And you...you need to get back to the gym. Keep training!"

"Yeah. Jackson says I'm gonna smoke that puppy. Can you believe he actually thinks I'm gonna win?" Dane tried to smile, wanting to share with Noel.

"I just want you safe."

"Noel? Please don't leave me for good. I know I'm not too educated, you know? And I worry I won't be that interesting to talk to for you, but I'll let you do anything to me as long as you don't leave."

"Dane...no. I don't stay with you just because you let me fuck you. I stay because I love you. And I'm going because I love you."

Dane nodded. "I'll make you proud."

Noel pulled Dane's shaggy head down. "You make me proud now. I know I'm fucking up... Can you forgive me?"

"You're scared, I get it. It's okay." Noel's fingers were digging into his shoulders, holding on. Holding on.

* * * * *

Dane watched as technicians set up a camera in the club where he was to fight Narone. He should be in his dressing room, but he was ready. His hands were wrapped; his body massaged and oiled. He was too wired to sit down. He knew he had to find that still place inside himself.

He couldn't let himself fall.

What if he couldn't get back up?

His hairline prickled with sweat as he worried about it.

He watched as a familiar TV broadcaster pulled up a chair ringside.

They'd be filming, talking, while he and Narone pounded each other.

Dane swallowed.

He couldn't find that place! He needed to find it, or he knew he'd fall.

He relaxed as warm arms wrapped around him from behind, and he felt Noel's head against the back of his neck.

Dane's fingers tightened around Noel's as they knitted their fingers. He didn't speak, just let Noel help him find that place.

Finally, he turned around and looked at Noel, who was dressed in a suit and tie. "Hey, look at you! Lookin' very fine!"

"I bought it 'specially for your fight."

"You did? Well, that was very nice of you! So...I'm gonna find you in the dressing room after, right?"

Noel nodded, cupping Dane's cheek.

"And I'll sleep with you tonight?"

Noel hugged Dane. "Yes, I promise! I've moved back in from the hotel where I was staying. These last weeks without you..."

"Yeah, I gotta tell you it was no fun livin' alone again. I moved into Mr. Trent's apartment. Been sleepin' on his couch. That bed, it's real nice and all, but I felt like putting newspaper on it, so I wouldn't feel so alone."

Jackson and the guys from Charlie's Gym escorted Dane to ringside. Jackson rubbed his back, whispered to him. The other men behind him were not saying anything. Just there. Letting Dane know they were with him. He was standing up for Charlie.

He glanced back before climbing into the ring, sweat coating his skin under the robe. Trying not to see the big crowd or the cameras. "I'm gonna do my best for all of you!" Dane promised. One by one, the men he trained with gripped his shoulder before standing back to find their seats.

Dane's throat was tight by the time they were done. He was gay. He wasn't the best fighter...but he was their guy. He was their guy.

He climbed into the ring and shuffled over to his corner. He tried not to look at the crowd, tried to tune out the prefight talk from the sports reporter. It was weird, hearing his stats coming from the guy. He'd watched him covering other fights before. Never thought he'd cover anything Dane did.

"He's gonna try to take you out fast. He has a lot of mean, but his weakness is endurance. You listening, baby?" Jackson asked, rubbing Dane's shoulders. "You just have to keep your feet, and you can take this puppy. And you *are* gonna take him."

Can't do it. Can't beat him. Hanging his head, Dane tried not to think that. But he couldn't help it. He and Jackson had rewatched a lot of Narone's old matches. Narone...he was the best. He was like a vicious pit bull. You didn't want to mess with him.

Dane's heart pumped, and he trembled like a horse at the tracks, ready to go. He looked around and saw the blur of faces. It was noisier than the fights he'd done in little clubs. There were so many people he didn't know.

Scared.

An elderly hand reached up and patted his bare leg. Dane looked down and saw Mr. Trent, who had been battling pneumonia and had been in the hospital during the last weeks of Dane's training. Bending down, he grabbed the older man's hands.

"What are you doin' here, Mr. Trent? You should be in bed!"

"W-where else would I be, boy? Charlie Burns would expect me to be here, and I expect me to be here. I want to see you knock out that cocky bastard."

Dane blinked tears. Until now, he'd felt so alone. The old man being here...

"Scared, huh?"

Dane nodded.

"S okay, kid. I felt the same way before I went into combat back when I was in the army. It's natural. But I have faith in you. You're one of Charlie's fighters. You got his heart, kid."

"Sometimes. Sometimes I'm a bum."

"Not tonight." Gilbert was there, putting an arm around Mr. Trent to steady him as he leaned on his cane.

"Hey, it's my man Gilbert!" Dane crowed, feeling just a little bit better.

"Dane." Gilbert held out his hand, and Dane reached down and shook it.

"I sure appreciate you comin' to see me tonight," Dane said.

"Don't give up on him, Dane. I think he'll come watch you fight," Gilbert said, cutting to the heart of Dane's upset.

Dane ducked his head. "I can't beat Narone, you know, but maybe I can go the ten rounds. If I can do that...I can walk away. I can be with Sparrow and Goldie and Noel. I can do my art thing, though who would buy something from an ex-boxer, am I right?"

Mr. Trent coughed, and Gilbert rubbed his back. "I have dibs on your first commission, Dane," Gilbert said. "Remember."

Dane nodded. Gilbert has asked for a painting of Tomas, the man his ex-lover had once loved. He wanted to hang it in his and Mr. Trent's loft to remember the laborer who had been a good man.

Narone stalked down to ringside with a parade of his people: his latest girlfriend, his trainer, and his assistants. He was wearing a silk robe, which was a contrast to Dane's ratty old one. He climbed through the ropes and glared over at the challenger, wasting no time.

"Think he means business," Dane joked weakly to Jackson.

"Yeah, but we mean business too, don't we?" Jackson said.

Dane felt his tension knot further when there was a delay prematch. Jackson wasn't happy.

"Wait a minute!" Jackson bellowed. "Hang on, I want a closer look at his gloves," he said, pointing at Narone.

Narone's trainer got in Jackson's face, and it looked as if the trainers would come to blows. Dane tugged Jackson back.

"What's wrong, Jackson?" Dane asked. "Why you so mad?"

"His gloves. See how high up the wrap is? He's skinning the gloves!" Jackson barked.

"Fuck you! You're just a fuckin' amateur!" Narone's trainer, Bernie, yelled back.

Narone didn't want to show off his gloves, but he was forced to flash them for inspection since sharp-eyed Jackson had protested. Dane and Narone both had tape wrapped around their gloves at the wrist to prevent the laces from coming loose, but the tape job Narone was sporting went even higher up the glove, which forced the padding around the knuckles to conform in such a way that when Narone hit Dane, he could break open his skin.

Dane watched as the tape was unwound and redone—this time while Jackson watched, arms folded and mouth tight.

"I'm gonna kill your boy. Don't matter to me about the gloves, you hear me?" Narone snarled at Dane's trainer.

Dane could feel his own tension rising as Narone's flat, dark eyes found him and let him feel the heat.

Gonna get you, boy, Narone mouthed, before puckering his lips into a kiss.

The bell rang, and Dane quickly ducked down on his knees in his corner. "Hear me, Charlie? I ain't got time to pray, but I sure wish you was here tonight, you know?" He got back up and faced his opponent and held his animal-like gaze as they began their dance, circling each other.

The noise from the crowd seemed to mute, and all he could hear was his own heartbeat and the slap of his feet as he moved.

Narone suddenly broke close and feinted before catching Dane in a left uppercut, right over his bad eye. It stung, rattling Dane so he felt like his brain bounced like a ball inside his skull. He backed off, gloves up. Narone was an aggressive contender, bringing the pain.

Dane hung back, wanting to learn more about his opponent...needing to feel his feet under him. He didn't have that groove yet.

He couldn't find his groove.

"C'mon, pussy boy, what kinda fighter are you? I'm gonna bend you over, you hear me, boy? It's what you fags like, ain't it?" Narone was taunting him, his words setting a slow-burning fuse and finding Dane's anger. He blinked the sweat from his eyes, still playing it cautiously, not wanting to let Narone too close until he had his feet.

"You ever bend over for Charlie? That's why he liked you so much, huh?"

In two steps, Dane danced close and swatted Narone with an undercut. He felt the impact on his glove, saw the other boxer rise and spin...and then he was down!

Narone shook his head, looking like a bull that had been hit by a truck, before his eyes found Dane, and he growled. He leaped to his feet, glaring.

The bell rang, and Dane retreated to his corner.

Jackson rubbed Dane's shoulders as Dane held Narone's killer gaze. Narone didn't let up.

"I think you got his attention," Jackson said wryly. "Watch out, 'cause he's gonna pour it on. You keep your feet. Keep your gloves up. I don't like how he went for your eye. You hear me?"

In the third round, Narone caught Dane to the body, with quick, vicious punches to Dane's bad rib.

Dane grunted at the impact, bouncing against the ropes, protecting his eye as Narone landed punch after punch. He couldn't break free.

Round four, Narone and Dane were in a clinch. "Where's your little blond girlfriend? I wanted to give her a kiss tonight after I put you down," Narone taunted.

Typically, Dane was grimly silent. He grunted as Narone caught him another to his head, over his eye. He could feel it swelling.

He shoved Narone free and pounded into him, momentum building, hitting him—one, two, three, forward, punch—

Narone ducked and tagged Dane's ribs before landing a solid left hook to Dane's bad eye.

Dane hit the ropes, staggering, holding on, blood running free. He blinked, dizzy, sick. His vision grayed out...

"...Come on, sit now." Jackson had to guide him to his chair, peering at Dane's eye.

"How's it look?" Dane asked.

"Like a cross between eggplant and raw meat, kid."

Heaving for breath, Dane hung his head a minute. He knew he should appear unhurt. Couldn't show his pain to Narone. He forced his shoulders back and raised his chin. "I like eggplant," he told Jackson. "It's really good, you know, for a vegetable."

The bell rang, and Narone tagged him another to the eye, right off.

Dane lashed out, clumsy, not the dancer the other man was, but he took the punishment to the body and kept slugging, kept slugging—

Narone hit the ropes, spitting blood. Hatred poured out of his eyes like black oil.

Dane had a strange moment of déjà vu. He was fighting the way Charlie had taught him. Fighting Charlie's kind of match. Had Charlie done these things? Had the old man landed a few punches but been laid low by punch after punch after punch...until his ribs gave and he couldn't see nothing and he was on his knees?

The crowd roaring and Narone roaring merged into a long space of sound and stretched out as Dane took another punch in round nine to his bad eye. He blinked

because he couldn't see colors. He could see shapes, black, white, gray, but he couldn't see the color of his own blood as he took the punishment Narone was serving up.

He was dizzy. Sound. Light. Stretching.

"Noel..." he muttered. After this fight, Noel would come home to him. *I'm just pieces, Noel. A glove. My feet moving. My jaw taking the impact, falling back, feeling the ropes against my legs, my back. Noel, I'm just pieces.*

Jackson was screaming instructions as Narone didn't let up. He didn't let up. Kept hitting Dane until he popped him another to the eye. Dane saw the shapes go away. The noise rose up like the ground. He was spinning, flying.

He was falling and he couldn't see it.

He couldn't see nothing.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Something Special

He heard numbers...counting up, counting down...knockout. Someone was knocked down. Knocked out. Someone musta lost his feet...

"Stay *down*, stay down, boy!"

Charlie? No, it was Jackson, 'cause Charlie, he was —

Dane rolled, and it felt like all the soft, spongy stuff in his head rolled, hurting like big swollen balloons caught inside.

"I...ain't laughin' now, Charlie," he whispered. He hurt. There was noise. Screams.

And then he saw the one person he wanted most to see, and it all shut down.

Gilbert jumped as Mr. Trent grabbed his shoulder urgently to get his attention over the noise of the boxing fans who'd come to watch Dane and Narone face off in the ring at last. He was bent forward in his chair, as Dane took blow after blow, waiting for Dane's gauntlet to be run.

"The police?" Gilbert rasped.

Mr. Trent nodded sharply. "I heard one of them say they are here to speak to Narone, once the match is done. Looks like Noel's father may have given them something on what happened to Charlie after you talked to them."

Gilbert swallowed. "Arthur will never forgive me."

Mr. Trent patted the servant's shoulder. "Maybe it's time you started dating again."

"You wouldn't mind if I brought someone home?" Gilbert asked, blushing a little.

"Just make sure he knows how to run that darned cappuccino machine since you and I aren't very good with it!" Mr. Trent joked. "But you did the right thing, just like Dane – standing up. Narone shouldn't get away with what he did."

Gilbert looked like he meant to say more but just then, Dane took a spinning punch in the ring. He looked dazed, his body twisting, blood spurting from above his eye on impact –

Mr. Trent leaped to his feet, shouting as Dane fell, crashing like a felled tree. "Down!" he yelled, even knowing that this wasn't what the boy wanted, but he couldn't bear to see that killer batter him anymore. The truth was, Dane was outclassed.

He and Gilbert made for ringside, both yelling for their Dane to stay down –

At first, Mr. Trent didn't see the slight figure standing next to Jackson.

When he did, his voice fell silent, as did Gilbert's and Jackson's and all the other men who were here for Dane.

He watched as Dane's battered doe eyes found that face and, blinking through the blood and sweat, fixed on it.

And Noel said, "Get back on your feet, Dane."

Dane felt every muscle as he staggered, trying to find his feet. Unstable, but the count was relentless –

"Six! Seven!"

He grabbed the bottom rope and from there reached a hundred miles up to the top one. He used his groaning arms to heft himself and wobbled. Below him, he saw Noel looking up at him. Expecting him to stand up.

He turned around and bounced off the ropes, his gloves up, signaling he was okay.

He was ready for more.

Narone snarled, his lips a bloody slash of satisfaction that he was going to get to pound into Dane some more.

They met in the center, both weaving now, tired, punch-drunk.

Narone watched for an opening, ready to deliver more hurt, when suddenly Dane rushed him, got inside, and clocked him with a roundhouse punch that sent the other man spinning into the ropes.

Dane didn't let up. He followed up with a long overhand right to the jaw. The punch landed flush, and he pummeled a hot volley of shots to Narone's ribs.

Narone crumpled, grunting, his mouth dripping blood and saliva as his eyes spit hate.

"You broke m'ribs, you fucking fag! I'm gonna kill your woman now! Ride him first and kill him dead, you hear me, you faggot?"

Dane couldn't see the color of the blood that flew through the air as they clashed, their gloves meeting in the war they fought.

"You touch him, I'll kill you," he grunted as they locked in a clinch, ready to spit out his mouth guard and set his teeth against the other man's throat for threatening Noel. Rip out his fucking throat! "I'll kill you!"

The bell rang.

And the referee had to separate the fighters as they continued to savage each other —

"To the body, baby! That's the way to go —" Jackson prodded.

Dane groaned as his chest was rubbed with cool water. He blinked, his bad eye so swollen he could barely see through it. "Noel?" he moaned, looking around like a little boy for his Santa Claus. "Noel, you there?"

A pale hand cupped his leg. "I'm here."

"Don't go nowhere, okay?" Dane closed his eyes and fought to breathe over the pain of his broken ribs.

"I've been here all along."

Dane turned on his stool and looked at Noel. He smiled, no idea how heartbreaking he looked with his battered face and broken body. "Yeah? You watched me fight, Noel?"

"I had to." Noel swallowed. "You're the man I love."

The bell rang again, and Dane got his feet under himself again.

Narone staggered across the ring toward him.

And Dane went out to meet him.

Dane wasted no time in getting down to business.

He delivered a nasty short right hand to Narone's jaw and watched as his knees buckled, so Narone dipped at the waist and then almost went down with one of his gloves brushing the floor.

Narone swung back up at the last second, like a pit bull that wouldn't give up as long as he could get meat under his jaws. His fists crashed into Dane's head, into his bad ribs, and snapped another like kindling —

The air pulsed, as if it were a beating heart of pain. Dane took two aggressive steps forward and wove to the inside, methodically grinding down Narone with clubbing rights to hammer him into submission.

"You're goin' down!" Dane, following up with another punch, felt the impact all up and down his sore arm as he broke Narone's ribs. One, two, punch, weave, take a punch, keep his feet, stagger, then on, in, go for him, go for the body, punish the body, break, smash the body —

"You can't win; y-you're just some loser!" Narone staggered, holding Dane in a clinch.

Dane shoved him away, the colors gone, the pain, the blood, the screaming all quieting in the moment when his fist whistled through the air and crashed into the side of Narone's skull –

Narone seemed to rise and float as Dane fell back, almost losing his balance and falling –

But then his gloves came back up. He was ready for more pain. Ready to take it. To keep going.

The referee shoving him back.

Narone down.

The numbers counted up as Dane tried to keep his feet.

And then his arm was up, lifted high by the referee –

Dazed.

His friends, reporters, cops stormed the ring.

He looked around but didn't see the face he needed to see.

"N-Noel?"

Gilbert. Jackson. Some guy with a microphone. All these people!

He was gonna fall on his ass. He was lost up here.

A crisp new suit crushed up against his sweating, blood-spattered skin.

Noel.

"I love you, Dane! I'm so proud of you!" Noel pulled Dane's battered head down and kissed him tenderly on the lips.

"Hey, your very great suit is gettin' all..." Dane huffed, not able to finish the thought. He saw some cops helping Narone down from the ring.

Mr. Trent and Gilbert surrounded him and Noel.

"Hey, how is everyone?" he asked. "Me, I'm feelin' really good! I didn't do so bad, you know?" He bent close to Noel, groaning a little. "You wanna help me walk?" he whispered.

"Always," Noel said, taking his hand.

He smiled under the touch of his friends, pulling Noel close. Noel, who was openly crying and looking at Dane like he was something special.

Epilogue

Art School

"What now?" Ricki took Dane's latest work and scanned it impatiently.

"I...tried to, you know, work in that stuff you were talking about. I read them books about perspective and—" Dane pushed back his heavy black glasses, which he had to wear now when doing his art. But he knew he was very lucky he'd regained the sight in his bad eye after his final fight with Narone, months back.

Ricki, an assistant teacher who had been at the exclusive art school two years longer than Dane, shoved away Dane's watercolor. "Look, it's not your fault you aren't a real artist. I know some people like your work because it's popular for some reason, but you're not one of us, and you're only embarrassing yourself by trying to fit in."

Dane felt like he'd taken a slug to the gut. "I know I'm not as good as some of you guys, but I really like to... I mean, I just want to be an artist. I don't care if people like it. It just makes me happy, like the way I feel when my boyfriend, Noel, makes me pancakes. He used to make them in the shape of my goldfish, Goldie, only she died a couple of weeks ago, and now he's making them round again on account he thinks it'll upset me. He thinks about things like that because he, you know, loves me."

"What?" Ricki leaned back in his desk, staring at Dane impatiently. "Look, I'm not interested in your personal life. This is one of the most prestigious art schools in the country. I have no idea why the director was impressed with your work, other than I suppose she felt you were enthusiastic, but this is not a suitable entry for the contest."

Ricki took the little watercolor, which Dane had signed, *I miss you, Goldie*, and tore it in half.

"It's nothing personal. You're a boxer. You're not an artist. I mean, did you even finish high school?"

Dane flushed. "No, I got kicked out on account I'm..." *Dumb.*

"An artist needs to be educated! You can't fake that. And this work...it didn't stick to the same composition as everyone else's."

Swallowing thickly, Dane still tried to get his point across. "Yeah, well, some people have said they like how I do things... And I really wanted to dedicate it to Goldie since she was a good friend of mine when I was all alone, you know? I think she knew it was safe to leave me since I ain't alone no more, and anyway, she's with Charlie now. We buried her near Charlie seeing as how Father Ralph said he wouldn't mind."

"I know that some people think you're special, but no true artist would ever like this kind of work. You have no chance of winning this year's award. I'm sorry if you think I'm being cruel, but I'm just saving you from embarrassing yourself." Ricki grabbed his leather bag and left the classroom, leaving Dane alone with the ruined watercolor.

He reached out and touched it. Gold fins shimmered in shades of copper and silver and brown. He'd been studying Japanese work recently and modeled it after that.

He picked up the two pieces of paper. "I can put you on the fridge. You may not be good enough for art school, you know, but I want to look at you, Goldie."

Dane walked across the gym floor below the loft he shared with his lover, Noel. He smiled at the good-natured ribbing from the fighters as they worked out in Charlie's Gym.

"Man, your boy has turned you into a total woman what with art school. Are you going to do some interior decorating next?" Manny teased him.

"Hey, that's a stereotype! I ain't so dumb," Dane shot back. But then he saw Noel was sitting on the couch by the elevator, waiting for him since he liked to do that. Take the elevator up with Dane so they could arrive home together.

His throat tightened, and he wished he could have had a chance to win at that contest. Just compete. The prize was a week painting in Florence, which Dane happened to know was in Italy where the *David* lived, and he ached to take Noel there with him.

"How did it go? Did you show the work to the screener?" Noel asked, reaching for his cane and getting to his feet. He still needed the cane, though he'd done a lot of physical therapy and was walking much better. Dane was proud of him, because as a fighter, he knew that it hurt to train. You had to break muscle down before you could build it up again.

"Naw, I changed my mind. I didn't have no chance!" He got into the elevator with Noel and, when it closed, kissed him, losing himself in the sweetness. Noel was the most wonderful boyfriend he could imagine! He was always kissing and touching Dane like he mattered.

Noel brushed his hair back, putting his arms around Dane's big, muscled body and closing his eyes. "I can't believe that. The mural you finished of Charlie in our loft is wonderful."

"You really like it?"

"It's like he's still with us every time we sit down to eat," Noel said. "And...I want you to paint Goldie next."

Dane ducked his head. Ever since his beloved first pet's death, he hadn't been able to paint. He'd felt too bad, he guessed. "I did," he confessed. He pulled out the torn watercolor and showed it to Noel as the elevator opened and they stepped out into the hallway.

Noel put down his briefcase and studied the small work. "Why did you tear it in half? It's beautiful!"

"I...uh, I didn't think it was so good no more."

Noel looked up at Dane. "It's different, but that doesn't make it wrong. Dane, are you happy at that school? I wanted you to be enrolled in the best."

Dane shrugged. "They know a lot of stuff I don't, I guess."

Noel frowned, unlocking the door to their loft and switching on the light.

The brilliant colors of their space welcomed them silently, Dane getting the usual zap of a thrill in the bright Indian silk toss cushions and the copper pots in the kitchen—all of which Noel had said he'd wanted Dane to choose, because he said they reflected the emerging artist in Dane.

Noel went to a desk drawer, opened it, and took out some scotch tape. As Dane watched, he carefully taped up the back of the artwork. "That'll do until I can get it to a conservator's."

Dane's eyes widened. "But..."

"I want it framed. I want you to get Goldie back the way you did Charlie. What you're doing is not unlike the ancient Egyptian tombs. The artists would illustrate with pictures of people and animals, and that way they lived on."

"I was going to enter that contest," Dane confessed. "But they said I couldn't on account that..." He faltered, not really understanding why he couldn't compete. In boxing, if a man met the requirements for competition, as long as his opponent agreed to meet him in the ring, he was allowed to fight for the chance to win. But he guessed things were different in art school.

"They didn't want your work, did they?" Noel's eyes held his, angry blue, and Dane nodded reluctantly.

"I'll have a word with the dean in the morning."

"Noel—"

"No, Dane. Academia is my world. I'm well aware of its prejudices. But people full of it should not be allowed to dictate what is acceptable."

Dane shrugged. "I really want to take you to Florence. I figured we could go see that *David* statue together just so, you know, you'd have no doubt I'm packing more square inches than he is!"

Noel hugged Dane. He didn't tell him he'd bought tickets as soon as he'd heard about the contest. If Dane lost, he still wanted to go. For Dane. "I don't need to go to Florence to know that, Dane," he whispered. "Let's go to bed. You can make love to me," he coaxed, guiding his boxer to their room.

"Is your leg bad again?" Dane had begun penetrating Noel when his leg hurt, sometimes too much for Noel to mount him.

Noel didn't know anymore which was better, mounting Dane or being mounted. He loved to see Dane's face full of eager radiance as he moved on top of him, as if Noel had offered him one of the fanciful pastries Dane still had a weakness for. He wanted to see it again now...

"A little to the left," Noel said. He was nude, lying open under Dane as Dane gently rode him. The aquarium behind them sparkled with the play of the exotic fish they'd chosen, giving off the only light. Soft green, so that Noel felt like a sailor dragged into a watery world by his merman.

"I'm proud of you," Noel said the day of the contest as Dane turned in his carefully repaired entry.

"Do you think I'll win?" Dane asked nervously, turning to glance back at his artwork left behind with all the other pieces. He wanted to snatch it back and take it home where it would be safe. It was scary leaving it in the art school. Scary leaving part of himself behind.

"I think..." Noel kissed Dane. "You already have."

 THE END 

Jan Irving

Jan Irving has worked in all kinds of creative fields, from painting silk to making porcelain ceramics, to interior design, but writing was always her passion.

She feels you can't fully understand characters until you follow their journey through a story world. Many kinds of worlds interest her, fantasy, historical, science fiction and suspense—but all have one thing in common, people finding a way to live together—in the most emotional and erotic fashion possible, of course!

Her first book for Loose Id, *The Janitor*, is about an unlikely hero who wins at both boxing and love. Jan also has a couple of paranormal novels, a historical western, and a short story about an angel and a CEO in the works.

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